The Terms of Involvement
A study of attempts to reform civil society’s role in public decision making in Sweden

Karin Gavelin

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Abstract
For the better part of a century, a distinguishing feature of the Swedish democratic model has been the close relationship between organised interests and public decision makers. Yet the first decade of the twenty-first century saw a number of attempts to reform Swedish civil society’s role in decision making, purportedly to make involvement activities more inclusive, reciprocal, flexible and consequential. The aim of this thesis is to describe and understand the motivations behind and the meaning of these reform attempts. Using an interpretive research design, and drawing on constructivist institutionalist perspectives on organisational change, the study asks questions about what has driven the attempted reform, how affected actors have interpreted its meaning and consequences, and how its framing and outcomes have been affected by the fact that it was devised and implemented both in traditional organisations and in networks consisting of local and national actors from civil society and the public sector. The thesis constitutes a contribution to the constructivist institutionalist literature concerned with the micro-foundations of organisational behaviour and to the governance research literature, to which it contributes empirical insights about how governance reforms have been interpreted and rationalised in Sweden.

Keywords: civil society, governance, reform, organisational behaviour, new institutionalism, institutional logics, institutionalisation, decoupling, interpretation, interpretive policy analysis.

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Since everyone mentioned on the following pages are based in Sweden I choose to write these words in Swedish.


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Stockholm, mars 2018
1. Introduction

The end of the first decade of the twenty-first century marked a transformative time for Swedish civil society. It was a period during which its status in Swedish society and its relationship with the public sector were being questioned and renegotiated simultaneously by different interests and at different levels of government. To these negotiations, politicians, academics and organisations from various factions of society brought competing ideas about what Swedish civil society was, what role it should play in the welfare state, and by what means it should exert influence over public decisions.

A simplified picture of the political divisions that dominated these debates would place at one side the left-leaning political parties and those organisations that favoured the preservation of the established relationship between the state and the sector, that at the time was often referred to as Sweden’s ‘associational life’.

This was a relationship based on a clear separation of roles between the sectors, where ‘popular movements’ and ‘interest organisations’ received state funding to fill their primary functions of mobilising civic activity, schooling their members in democratic practices and bringing their insights and demands to decision makers’ attention. Meanwhile, services such as health care, social care and support for disadvantaged groups were primarily state-funded and state-run, leaving little room for nonprofit organisations to establish themselves as alternative service providers.

At the other side, and challenging this traditional set-up, were the centre-right Alliance parties and a number of organisations that called for improved opportunities for ‘civil society’ to fill a more prominent role in the delivery of

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1 The definition of civil society I adhere to in this study broadly follows that endorsed by the Swedish Government, which describes civil society as a sector, separate from the state, the market and private households, where individuals, groups and organisations act together in common interest without seeking to make profits from their activities. (Prop. 2009/10:55 En politik för det civila samhället, p.28) See chapter four for a discussion about this and alternative terms.

2 The Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna) and the Left Party (Vänsterpartiet).

3 In Swedish: ‘föreningsslivet’. See chapter four for further discussion about this and related terms.

4 This change in terminology – from ‘associational life’ and ‘popular movements’ to ‘civil society’ – is significant. It reflects at once how political visions for the sector shifted over this period, and how related shifts have taken place in how the wider public sector views civil society and, crucially, how its organisations choose to define themselves. These themes are discussed further in chapter four.
public services. When the Alliance parties won the election in 2006, their new vision for the sector was outlined in Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt’s inaugural speech, where he described state-run public services as a “complement” to the responsible and charitable forces of civil society. With this statement he flipped the traditional division of roles between the sectors; placing the primary burden of responsibility for citizens’ welfare on civil society rather than the state.¹ In the years that followed, a number of attempts to reform civil society’s involvement in service provision and public decision making were incorporated into government policy.²

In an anthology on Swedish civil society published in 2012, the political, social and organisational changes that were at once the focus and the outcomes of these debates were described variously as a “transformation of the social contract” in Sweden,³ a “system shift”⁴ in civil society’s social function, and as signs that state-civil society relations were moving away from Sweden’s traditional, social-democratic model towards a more liberal set-up, in which the shrinking welfare state is compensated for by the charitable activities of civil society.⁵ Even if there was little agreement on the precise nature of and reasons behind these developments, that significant changes were underway for Swedish civil society at the time appears clear.

This PhD thesis addresses one particular aspect of these developments; namely, a series of attempts made in the first two decades of the twenty-first century to reform Swedish civil society’s opportunities to influence public decision making. Its starting point is an ambition to understand what motivations drove these reform attempts and what consequences they are seen to have had for the public sector-civil society relationship. Debates about civil society’s role in the output side of public services, as potential service providers, are, whilst a highly important part of the context,⁶ not the focal point of this study.

I interpret the reform attempts analysed in this thesis as forming part of a wider, international reform movement promoting horizontal, decentralised and network-based approaches to public policy making; developments that in the academic literature are often referred to as the rise of ‘governance’.⁷

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² See chapters four, five and six.
³ Wijkström 2012, ch.1.
⁵ Similar to the model of state-civil society relations known from the Anglo-Saxon world. See e.g. Reuter 2012, ‘Överenskommelsen som spegel och aren’, in Wijkström (ed), Civilsamhället i samhällskontrakten. En antologi om vad som står på spel, p.234-6, drawing on Salamon & Anheier’s (1998, p.228-229) adaptation of Esping-Andersen’s (1990) welfare system typology as a way of classifying civil society “regimes”.
⁶ In chapters two and five, I discuss the reform concept and explain my reason for applying it here. I conclude that if a reform is understood as an attempt to make some kind of improvement – albeit for reasons that may not be clear cut, well-articulated or widely agreed upon – the policy developments in focus for this study can be interpreted as attempts or intentions to reform civil society involvement in decision making in Sweden.
⁷ As I will elaborate in later chapters, the Agreement in which the reform ideas were first formally articulated, was the product of attempts by the Alliance Government and a group of national-level civil society actors to clarify the terms of their relationship in the fields of health and social care. In these negotiations, the Government’s explicit aim was to encourage a more diverse range of providers in health and social care services.
⁸ Detailed below and in chapter two.
Governance reforms raise questions about who should have a place at the decision-making table, how their input should be gathered, and how far their influence should stretch. Whilst this PhD thesis does not examine the democratic credentials of the studied reform, I argue that the fact that it concerns, at a fundamental level, the condition and status of representative democracy today, makes questioning how the reform ideas have been motivated and implemented all the more important.

As will be outlined below and in forthcoming chapters, I address these queries by means of an interpretive policy analysis, drawing on constructivist institutionalist theories of how organisations frame and respond to pressures for change. In that theoretical tradition this study provides an unusual example as it examines a public reform that has been created, disseminated, interpreted and implemented in settings that include both traditional organisations and multi-level networks, populated by members from both the public sector and civil society.

In this first chapter, I provide a brief background to the study, introduce the theoretical literatures, research problem, aim and questions, and give an overview of the research design that I have employed in addressing them. More detailed descriptions of the bodies of literature I make use of, the methods applied and the social and political context in which the study is situated are presented in chapters two to four.

1.1 A close relationship under scrutiny

In accounts of modern Swedish history, much emphasis has been placed on the role played by the large popular movements in shaping the democratisation of the political system and, later on, as key contributors in the construction of the welfare state. The relationship between the Government and these organisations was characterised by interdependence, serving both to divert conflicts and establish alliances, and with time came to be the default model for state-interest group interactions in Sweden in the second half of the twentieth century.

The formal channels that civil society organisations used to influence public decision makers during this time included responding to remiss procedures – a formalised type of written consultation, participating in or giving evidence to

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16 See chapter four for definition and a discussion about this and other ways of conceptualising these organisations.
18 Lundäsen 2010b, p.59; Rothstein & Trägårdh 2007, p.229.
19 The remiss procedure is a formalised type of written consultation, which has developed in response to Sweden’s constitutional requirement that the preparation of government policy should involve a stage where information and opinions are sought from stakeholders within and outside of the public sector. Its proclaimed purpose is to uncover possible, unforeseen consequences of the proposal at hand and to encourage public debate on government issues. Typically, these consultations involve the circulation of draft reports or policy recommendations to a select group of stakeholders, who are invited to respond in writing within a set time period. Stakeholders that are not formally invited
governmental commissions, and being represented on public agencies’ decision-making boards. In the latter, interest groups were sometimes granted an actual share of power, in the sense that they actively contributed to making decisions and shaping policy. Alongside these formal mechanisms, civil society actors also exerted influence through lobbying activities and widespread informal contacts with decision makers. Among historians and scholars of Swedish civil society, this by international standards remarkably close relationship between the sectors has been the subject of considerable interest.

It has been noted that the boundaries between the Swedish state and civil society at times have been so blurred that it has been difficult to tell them apart. However, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the nature of the public sector-civil society relationship appeared to be shifting. The beginnings of change can be traced to the 1980s, when the neocorporatist decision-making boards, which for some decades had been an institutionalised component of public agency decision making in Sweden, began to be dismantled. Along with a simultaneous decline of multi-member governmental commissions, this meant that the opportunities for formal power sharing granted to select interest groups gradually diminished. In the years that followed, interest organisations came to be given a more hands-off, advisory role in policy making. In place of the decision-making laymen boards, many public bodies set up advisory councils in fields such as pensioners’ policy or disability policy. To these, select interest groups were invited to regular

may still respond to the remiss on their own initiative, provided, of course, that they are aware of its existence. Occasionally, the written consultation model is replaced or complemented with alternative approaches, such as consultation meetings. See Bäck, Erlingsson & Larsson 2013, Den svenska politiken. Struktur, processer och resultat. Upplaga 4, p.188-189; Prop. 2009/10:55, p.70.

20 Governmental commissions are a form of public inquiry, conducted in preparation of policy proposals or governmental decisions, that have been in use in some form in Sweden since the 1600s. They are led by external, Government-appointed and formally independent committees or individual investigators. They are typically extensive undertakings that may take several years to complete and that draw heavily on the insights of key stakeholders and academics, contributing through expert- and reference groups. Upon publication, a commission’s final report is often subject to a remiss procedure, the responses to which affect how the Government makes use of its recommendations. Whilst the official purpose of governmental commission is to be used as a basis for future policy proposals or legal changes, they have also been known to be used as a strategy for postponing policy decisions. See Bäck, Erlingsson & Larsson 2013; Hysing & Lundberg 2016, Making governance networks more democratic: lessons from the Swedish governmental commissions, Critical Policy Studies.

21 These boards, populated by state actors and interest groups (including private business interests, labour organisations and popular movements), were a central reason behind the Swedish model being widely labelled a neocorporatist system. For summaries of the layman boards’ functions and subsequent decline, see Hermansson et al. 1999, ’Avkorporativisering och lobbyism - konturerna till en ny politisk modell’. Demokratiutredningens forskarvolym XIII, SOU 1999:121; Lundberg 2014; Rothstein & Bergström 1999.

22 E.g. Lundberg 2014; Micheletti 1995; Rothstein & Bergström 1999; Rothstein & Trägårdh 2007.


24 Hermansson et al. 1999; Rothstein & Bergström 1999. See chapter four for a summary of this development.

25 Hermansson et al. point to research showing that the proportion of single-member commissions (conducted by an individual civil servant, politician or academic) increased significantly after the 1960s, with the proportion of multi-member commissions representing different sectors and interests having declined over the same period. See Hermansson et al. 1999, p.29; Lundberg 2014, p.40-41.

26 Lundberg 2014; Micheletti 1995; Rothstein & Bergström 1999.


28 Advisory councils (råd) or delegations (delegationer) exist at all levels of government including national agencies.

29 At the national level, these are typically represented through large membership organisations with an internal democratic set-up and a federal structure, meaning that they have a central body that represents their local groups in national
meetings with decision makers to give their views on policy matters. Whilst the well-established institutions of governmental commissions and the remiss procedure remained intact through this period, scholars have suggested that they were no longer as prolific or as influential as they once had been.30

More recently, these institutions, too, have come under scrutiny, as actors from both the public sector and civil society have sought to renew, clarify and formalise their relationship through a series of policy developments and lobbying initiatives.31 At the heart of these has been a stated ambition to make civil society involvement practices more inclusive, reciprocal, flexible and consequential.32

**A vaguely formulated reform**

Ideas about how involvement practices can be modernised have been promoted simultaneously by different bodies in Sweden and internationally.33 I see the Swedish Government’s endorsement of the reform agenda as having been formally declared in the publication of the Agreement between the Swedish Government, national idea-based organisations in the social sphere,34 and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions35 (hereafter referred to as the Agreement) in 2008, and in the Government’s first Civil Society Bill, launched the following year.36

The Agreement was the first of its kind at the national level in Sweden, although similar documents existed in other countries37 and at the local level.38

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30 Micheletti (1995) describes how governmental commissions in the 1970s began to be criticised for being overly secretive, and that difficulties in managing conflicting interests led to politicians increasingly keeping ‘collective action organisations’ out of governmental commissions from the 1980s onwards. Drawing on Hermansson et al. (1999) and others, Lundberg (2014) suggests that the number of governmental commissions peaked in the 1990s and appear to have declined in recent years (his data covers the period from 1960-2011). Along with the decline of multi-member governmental commissions noted above, Lundberg suggests that this implies that “the opportunity for civil society organisations to be represented in governmental commissions has been reduced” (p.41). Further, in a comment on the role of the remiss procedure, Lundberg shows that while the number and range of civil society organisations invited to respond to remiss documents increased between the 1960s and 2000s, the sector’s relative share of access to these fora decreased in relation to that of state and market actors over the same time period. He also notes that civil society organisations are more likely to abstain from responding to a remiss today than in the past, which he interprets as an indication that the remiss procedure has come to be seen as a less effective means of influencing policy.

31 See chapters four, five and six.

32 As articulated in the Agreement between the Swedish Government, national idea-based organisations in the social sphere and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions and the 2009 Civil Society Bill, detailed below and in chapter five.

33 E.g. the European Council, the European Union and the United Nations; see chapters four, five and six for details.

34 The “social sphere” (det sociala området) refers to the following policy areas: health care, medical care, social care, financial support for the sick and disabled, and financial support for families and children (hereafter primarily referred to as health and social care policy).

35 [2008/2110/UF, Överenskommelsen mellan Regeringen, idéburna organisationer inom det sociala området och Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting.](#)


38 Uppsala Local Authority had since 2001a local agreement between the authority and voluntary associations targeting the elderly, disabled people, and carers.
Aimed at identifying shared principles to guide the future relationship between the public sector and civil society organisations operating in health and social care, it was drawn up collaboratively by actors from civil society, the Government Offices and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. This collaborative approach continued to characterise much of the efforts to disseminate and implement the Agreement in the years that followed.39

Both the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill presented six principles intended to guide future relations between the public sector and civil society. Whereas some of these primarily concerned the financial aspects of the relationship,40 the ‘Dialogue’ principles specifically addressed civil society organisations’ role in public decision making. So, to an extent, did the ‘Transparency’ principles, which addressed the need to protect civil society’s advocacy function and its role in channelling citizens’ political voice.

I consider these principles and the commitments made under them the primary, formal articulations of the reform ideas in focus for this study. Among their central messages were that civil society’s involvement in decision making ought to be made more inclusive, reciprocal, flexible and consequential.41 Public bodies were encouraged to widen their invitations to more organisations and to experiment with alternative modes of involvement alongside the established methods.42 Yet the wordings of these policy texts were vague. Few details were given about their practical implications: what precisely they sought to change and why a change of involvement methods was seen to be necessary. ‘Dialogue’, a central and normatively loaded word, was not defined.

Moreover, observers of these policy developments have called both the intentions behind them and their substantive value into question. It has been suggested that whilst the ideas about civil society involvement presented in the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill were promoted as attempts to “broaden and deepen the bases of public decisions” and to strengthen democracy,43 they could also be seen as strategic moves by the then governing Alliance parties and certain factions of civil society to steer Swedish civil society organisations towards a new role, more apt to serve a deregulated, competition-driven public service system.44 For these policy events have not, of course, occurred in a vacuum. As noted above, they form part of a wider transformation of Sweden’s public services, which over the past three decades have moved away from the state-centric model for which they were once known, towards one increasingly centred around choice, competition and the contracting out of services to private providers.45 Contemporaneous with these developments has been a shift in the

39 See chapter six.
40 Such as the principles of Quality, Continuity and Diversity.
notion of whom the Swedish public sector is there to serve, to now explicitly include the market alongside citizens and residents.° Although at the time of writing, this transformation has yet to settle and is continually analysed and debated in academia as well as in wider society.°

**An empirically rooted research problem**

It is thus not clear to what extent the reform attempts in focus here were intended to actually change involvement practices, or whether they rather should be understood as attempts to further cement the established Swedish tradition of involving civil society actors in decision making, albeit in slightly different guises and under new labels. Both possibilities evoke the follow-up question: *if so, why?* Were these developments a response to some observed problems with traditional involvement methods? Were they, as some suggested, attempts to accommodate a new vision for civil society’s role in the welfare state? Or were they simply a reflection of how collaborative and deliberative decision-making practices were fashionable ideals in public administrations at the time?

That a public administration reform suffers from a lack of clarity pertaining to its intentions and meanings is not unusual. Similar questions can be raised about other instances of public sector reform, where both the underlying motivations and the potential future implications tend to be shrouded in a vague and often ambiguous policy language. Yet the reform attempts studied here have potential wide-reaching implications, both for Sweden’s particular model of interest group involvement in the representative democratic system and for Swedish civil society’s function and status. For these reasons I argue that making visible how the reform has been rationalised and how affected actors have interpreted its meaning and impacts is crucial.

These queries constitute the empirical roots of the research problem addressed in this study. In the next section, I provide the problem with a theoretical frame and explain where in the existing literature on organisational change I aim to make a contribution.

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47 E.g. Hartman 2011; SOU 2016:78 *Ordning och reda i välfärden.* A more detailed discussion about the nature and implications of these public service reforms can be found in chapter four.
48 As described in the governance literature and the deliberative democracy literature; more of which below and in chapter two.
1.2 Two scholarly perspectives

This study draws on two principal bodies of literature. My theoretical framework builds primarily on constructivist institutionalism in organisational analysis, a research field concerned with understanding organisational behaviour. It is primarily to this literature that my theoretical discussions are aimed. As mentioned, however, I also consider the policy developments studied here expressions of the so-called ‘governance-turn’ in public administrations. In my forthcoming analysis, I therefore draw on the efforts that governance scholars have made to understand this reform movement. To the governance literature, I aim to provide new empirical insights about how governance reforms have been interpreted and rationalised in the Swedish context. As such, I contribute to ongoing discussions about whether governance constitutes a departure from or rather a continuation of Sweden’s long history of interest-group involvement in public decision making. The following pages introduce these two bodies of literature in turn.

Constructivist institutionalism: analytical tools

At the core of the research problem sketched out above is an ambition to understand what drives public organisations to change their ways of thinking, talking and working, but also what might cause them to resist change. I share my concern for these questions with scholars of organisational analysis, a field of research from which I have drawn the main theoretical building blocks used in this study. Here, I primarily make use of theories developed in the field of constructivist institutionalism: the branches of organisational analysis rooted in a social constructivist ontology. In this I include the North American sociological institutionalists and the so-called Scandinavian school of new institutionalism, among others. Scholars in these fields ground their work in the assumption that organisations are social actors embedded in a social environment, and that their actions are largely guided by the norms, values and culture found in this environment. Their identities and behaviour, in other words, are socially constructed.

The constructivist institutionalist branches of organisational analysis first emerged out of critiques of the rational-choice perspective that dominated early organisational analysis and the then prevailing view of organisations as primarily driven by a quest for technical and economic efficiency. Criticisms of this perspective were born from empirical observations that consistently failed to find support for the idea that organisations operate as rational, goal-
What the new institutionalist scholars instead found was that it tends to be processes, rather than end results, that direct organisational life. And real-life organisational processes – of working, agenda setting, decision making or planning – are steered less by expected outcomes than by norms indicating the appropriate way to behave in a particular situation, field and time. These norms may, but do not necessarily, correspond with what actually produces the best results. Organisational theorists James G. March and Johan P. Olsen have famously called this the “logic of appropriateness”, in contrast to the logic of expected outcomes that is central to the rational choice perspective in organisation theory.

However, in prompting a shift of attention from the logic of consequentiality to the logic of appropriateness, constructivist institutionalists have not suggested that these are mutually exclusive forces in organisational behaviour. On the contrary, they have acknowledged that rationalist considerations come into play in a number of ways in organisations’ design and work. They play a part in guiding what ideas become popular, in organisations’ decision to adopt new ideas or practices and in how reforms are justified once they have been implemented. Rationalist reasoning thus remains an important factor in organisations’ rhetoric and other aspects of the front that they present to themselves and the surrounding world. What the work of the sociological institutionalists has served to highlight is that a front is sometimes all the rationalist considerations amount to. Beneath them can be found a more complex, unspoken mix of reasoning that may go unacknowledged also by the individuals involved. This implies that when organisations or the individuals within them appear to be making strategic choices, they may in fact be expressing their “passive acquiescence” to prevailing norms of appropriateness.

The constructivist institutionalist literature is thus concerned with the emergence, spread and functions of the ideas, values or practices that govern organisational behaviour. Grounded in taken-for-granted notions of what is right and desirable under prevailing moral and scientific norms, these ideas, values and practices spread through informal and formal ‘institutional pressures’ that

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dictate how organisations should act to achieve success, status, stability and resources in their field at a particular moment in time.\textsuperscript{60} While ideas and practices that spread in this way may be relatively short-lived – for example, management trends that quickly go in and out of fashion – the more established and taken-for-granted they are, the more ‘institutionalised’ they are said to be. Highly institutionalised ideas and structures may be formalised in laws and regulations, but often take a more informal and fluid form, being reproduced through the routine, day-to-day activities of organisational members.\textsuperscript{61}

\textit{A pragmatic, micro-level study in a complex, multi-level setting}

A number of scholars have questioned the usefulness of a strictly constructivist perspective for understanding how organisations respond to pressures to change.\textsuperscript{62} They have challenged the caricature of organisations as “passive recipients of institutional pressures”, which dominates parts of the constructivist institutionalist literature.\textsuperscript{63} These scholars have suggested that organisations’ responses to institutional pressures is rather a function of a number of interacting factors, including the contents and force of the institutional pressures they are subjected to, the culture of the field they operate in, and their internal organisational dynamics.\textsuperscript{64} Each combination of factors will elicit different responses and, importantly, each response will involve different modes of reasoning and display different degrees of active agency on the part of the responding organisation.\textsuperscript{65}

Consequently, some institutionalist scholars have called for the development of a complementary approach to the rationalist/modernist and the constructivist perspectives that underpin different branches of organisational analysis. The hope is that such a combined approach could generate a more nuanced understanding of organisational behaviour.\textsuperscript{66} In this, scholars have also called for closer attention to be paid to the perspectives and impacts of individual agents in organisational change processes. Such a focus, it has been argued, would strengthen the ‘micro-foundations’ of organisational analysis, and would serve as a complement to its long-term emphasis on macroprocesses and field forces.\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{60} Johansson 2002; March & Olsen 1998; Meyer & Rowan 1977; Oliver 1991.

\textsuperscript{61} Johansson 2002; Meyer & Rowan 1977; Powell & Colyvas 2008, ‘Microfoundations of Institutional Theory’, in Greenwood et al. (eds), \textit{The Sage Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism}.


\textsuperscript{65} Greenwood & Hinings 1996; Oliver 1991.

\textsuperscript{66} Czarniawska 2008, March & Olsen 2009; Oliver 1991; Revik 2008; Tallberg 2010.

In the aim to contribute to these developing paths in organisational analysis, this thesis draws on what Kjell Arne Røvik has labelled a “pragmatic” adoption of the constructivist perspective. This means that while I primarily employ a constructivist institutionalist perspective in my analysis of how the studied reform has been framed, interpreted and implemented, I also keep an open mind to findings that support a more rationalist understanding of organisational behaviour. That is, I do not presume that the creation, dissemination and implementation of the studied reform have been driven by a particular logic of reasoning. Instead, I use an interpretive, micro-level research design in the aim to make visible how a combination of logics—outcome-oriented and norm-driven—may have interacted to shape affected actors’ interpretations of and responses to the reform ideas.

It is my belief that applying such a pragmatic, interpretive approach, which accepts that organisational motives can be both ambiguous and muddled, will enable me to build a more nuanced picture of the interplay between external institutional pressures and internal interests and values that have guided attempts to reform civil society involvement in health and social care policy in Sweden. As such, this study should be seen as a contribution to the institutionalist literature concerned with the micro-foundations of organisational behaviour and the interplay between micro and macro developments in organisational change processes.

I further suggest that this study’s contribution to the institutionalist literature is strengthened by its distinct setting. This is a study of a public reform that has been created, disseminated, interpreted and implemented in settings that include both traditional organisations and cross-sector networks, populated by members from the public sector and civil society. Some of the actors involved in these activities have held overlapping roles within them. For instance, some public servants have acted both as authors of reform texts and, later on, as implementors of the reform ideas in their respective organisations. Similarly, some civil society representatives have acted both as authors of reform texts and, later on, as implementors of the reform ideas in their respective organisations.

acknowledged that the Scandinavian branch of institutionalist theory has placed more emphasis on how organisational change processes are handled at the micro-level. See e.g. Czarniawska 2008; Johansson 2002; Ravik 2008.

Røvik 2008. Note that whilst I draw on the underlying tenets of Røvik’s ideas, in particular his endorsement of an institutional analysis that is empirically rooted and embraces ambiguity, I do not make full use of his theoretical propositions. Røvik applies the ‘pragmatic’ approach specifically to studies of the origins, transfer and translation of organisational ideas. This thesis neither investigates the roots of the studied reform nor attempts to objectively map how it has been translated into practice by recipient organisations, but focuses solely on how the reform ideas and subsequent dissemination and implementation efforts have been framed and interpreted by actors affected by them.


An example is how the Agreement was written in collaboration between actors from civil society and the public sector; all with different needs and agendas. In an effort to produce a document that all participants could sign up to, the policy message was kept intentionally imprecise, resulting in a reform that, as we will see, was interpreted and put to practice differently by different audiences.
movement and as participants in involvement activities that have sprung from these ideas.

This network setting sets this study apart from the majority of constructivist institutionalist research, which has tended to focus on how individual organisations or particular organisational fields respond to new ideas and practices. Applying a micro-level interpretive analysis to a reform conducted in a complex, multi-level and cross-sector setting is done here in the assumption that the reform’s fate is likely to have been affected by factors specific to these added dimensions. These factors may include power relationships, field fragmentation, overlapping roles, conflicts of interests and consensus seeking between different types of organisations. How the particulars of this setting have affected how the studied reform was framed, disseminated, interpreted and implemented thus constitutes another facet of the research problem addressed in this thesis.

Governance research: a scholarly context
The reform examined here concerns the role of civil society organisations in public decision making in health and social care policy. As such, it has democratic implications. It pertains to questions about how, outside of elections and party-activity, citizens and interest groups should contribute to decisions and political processes that affect them. A body of research where such issues have been addressed is the governance literature, which has studied the emergence in recent decades of a less hierarchical, more decentralised and network-based approach to decision making and service delivery.

The term governance here refers to changes to how the public sector is organised, a key feature of which is the tendency to involve a broader range of actors, both from within and outside of the public sector, in decision making and service delivery.71 This may take the form of policy networks, co-production of public services, citizen participation and other horizontal decision-making mechanisms.72 Governance scholars have described a shift “from government to governance”;73 or from traditional ‘Public Administration’, via ‘New Public Management’, to ‘New Public Governance’.74

When scholars of governance have sought to explain the spread of these trends in recent decades, they tend to point to how decision makers today are faced with a series of complex challenges that span the spectrum of policymaking, from the local to the global level. Examples include climate

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74 Osborne 2010, The New Public Governance? Note that Osborne, along with many other governance scholars, has also questioned the “government to governance” narrative by pointing out that the two models tend to coexist. See e.g. Jacobsson, Pierre & Sundström 2015; Klijn 2008; Osborne 2010; Pierre 2009, ‘Tre myter om governance’, in Hedlund & Montin (ed), Governance på svenska; Sundström, Smeryd & Furusten (eds) 2010 Organizing Democracy. The Construction of Agency in Practice.
change, migration and growing social divides; all issues said to require broad-based expertise to be solved and which therefore necessitate a flexible and collaborative approach to public management. That these policy dilemmas also tend to defy regional and national boundaries means that they require the involvement of decision makers and stakeholders operating at different levels of government: from the local to the supranational.

It has been pointed out, however, that while these horizontal decision-making mechanisms may represent a departure from traditional public administration practice in the Anglo-Saxon world, where most of the governance literature originates, this is not necessarily the case elsewhere. In fact, the extent to which governance can be considered a new phenomenon has been shown to differ significantly between countries and settings. 75

In the case of Sweden, opinions vary about whether governance represents a departure from or rather a continuation of its long tradition of interest-group involvement in decision making. 76 Some researchers have argued that the language and some of the practices associated with governance have indeed been imported from other contexts, and are thus new to the Swedish context. For instance, it has been pointed out that the informal, diverse and flexible nature of so-called governance networks distinguish them from the institutionalised, clearly defined and bounded forms of interest-group participation such as the governmental commissions that have formed the heart of Sweden’s traditional model of interest-group involvement. 77 Others have pointed to an increase in networked decision making in certain policy areas, such as environmental policy and public health, as examples of how the governance trend has left marks on the Swedish public sector. 78

It has also been suggested, however, that while the forms of interaction between the sectors may be in part new, their essence is not new in Sweden. On the contrary, some scholars have argued that the Swedish model could justifiably have been described in terms of ‘governance’ all along. 79 This is by virtue of it being, as historian Lars Trägårdh puts it, a society that has governed itself “through a mode of democracy in which the boundaries between the government and the governed, between citizen and subject, are highly fluid and permeable on a continuing basis”. 80

A premise of this study is that if the attempts to reform civil society involvement practices in focus here are indeed expressions of the ‘governance

76 Often described in terms of neo-corporatism; see e.g. Hermansson et al. 1999; Rothstein & Bergström 1999, Korporet- morns fall och den svenska modellens kris.
77 Hysing & Lundberg 2016.
78 Montin & Hedlund 2009a, ‘Governance som interaktiv samhällsstyrning – gammalt eller nytt i forskning och politik? ’ and 2009b, ‘Den samrättade samhällsstyrningen: både kontinuitet och förändring’, both in Hedlund, G. & Montin, S. (eds) (2009) Governance på svenska. Again, Montin and Hedlund warn readers against accepting the “government to govern- ance” narrative, pointing to evidence of a decline of such practices in other areas. As an example they refer to a crumbling of the alliance between the welfare state and women’s interest organisations, which they claim is in part the result of privatisation of public services. Montin & Hedlund 2009b, p.201-202.
80 Trägårdh 2007, p.260.
...turn’ and as such are (to some degree) imported and translated from other countries and contexts, it is important to question not only why they have been adopted, but also how they fit with past traditions of public sector-civil society interactions in Sweden and how any emergent conflicts between new and old values or practices are handled.

Again, these questions have democratic implications. For whilst the ideas about civil society involvement presented in the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill have been promoted as ways to strengthen democracy,\(^81\) they can also be seen to represent a shift in democratic priorities. They appear to encourage a move away from a system that prioritised representativity and accountability, towards one based on different ideas about what constitutes good democratic decision making. By appearing to prioritise inclusion and flexibility over representativity and clear lines of accountability, they give rise to questions about whether they may in fact lead to a dilution, rather than a strengthening, of civil society influence.

Thus, alongside my uses of and intended contributions to the field of constructivist institutionalism in organisational analysis, this study is also intended to make a contribution to the governance literature. This contribution takes the form of empirical insights about how governance reforms have been interpreted and rationalised in the Swedish public sector, where it has been questioned whether they represent a change of direction or rather a continuation of past practices.\(^82\) I approach this task by asking how organisations and individuals driving and targeted by\(^83\) the attempted reform of civil society’s involvement in public decision making have interpreted and rationalised these ideas, and how they have translated them into practice – or not, as the case may be.

It is my intention that such insights, unveiled through an interpretive, micro-level research approach and rooted in a constructivist institutionalist perspective, can serve as a useful complement to the governance literature’s broad, macro-level explanations of the origins and value of the so-called governance turn.

However, the largely descriptive and normative tendencies of the governance literature mean that its use as a source of theoretical tools is limited. It does not provide analytical concepts to help understand the drivers, meaning and consequences of recent attempts to reform civil society’s involvement in public policy making in Sweden. What it does offer is a scholarly context from which I can draw descriptions and interpretations to help illuminate the phenomena I study. In this thesis, the explanations offered in the governance literature for the rise of governance serve as a touchstone for my own analysis of affected actors’ interpretations of developments in the public sector-civil society relationship in Sweden. This literature also raises questions and points to problems afflicting governance practices, such as issues pertaining to representation, legitimacy and

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\(^81\) Prop. 2009/10:55, p.32, 56.
\(^83\) “Targeted by the reform” here refers both to individuals in the public sector who were expected to implement the reform ideas and to civil society actors expected to take part in involvement activities. As noted, the network setting in which the reform took shape meant that many actors performed overlapping roles, for instance by simultaneously acting as instigators or authors of the reform texts and as their target audiences.
transparency, as will be detailed in forthcoming chapters. These ongoing academic discussions serve to aid identification and understanding of similar challenges brought to the surface in this study.

Aim and research questions

The aim of this thesis is to describe and understand the motivations behind and meaning of recent attempts to reform civil society’s involvement in policy making in the fields of health and social care in Sweden. Put slightly differently, I aim to provide insights into what motivating factors have driven the attempted reform, how affected actors have interpreted its value and consequences, and how the cross-sector, multi-level settings in which it was conceived and implemented appears to have affected its fate. I address this aim by means of two research questions:

1. How can we understand the reform ideas’ appeal to instigators and target audiences?
2. Has the attempted reform been seen by affected actors to bring about any changes to the public sector-civil society relationship in the affected policy areas?

These questions are answered with the help of an analytical framework presented in the next chapter.

1.3 An interpretive approach to policy analysis

The methods used in this study are drawn primarily from the interpretive policy analysis literature. This literature describes an approach to policy studies that centres on meaning and meaning-making. It builds on the assumption that if researchers want to understand a policy event, they need to approach it from multiple perspectives, starting by investigating the meanings that affected actors apply to it. As articulated by the organisational theorist and methodologist Dvora Yanow, such an approach calls on us to ask: “what does a policy mean; to whom, aside from its drafters and implementors, does it have meaning; and how do various interpretations of meaning affect policy implementation?”

My decision to turn to this methodological field is based on the assumption that asking how my research subjects make sense of their world and rationalise

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84 My empirical focus corresponds with the policy areas targeted by the Agreement: health care, medical care, social care, financial support for the sick and disabled, and financial support for families and children.
87 Yanow 1993, p.41.
their actions – questions that constitute core building blocks of interpretive research – lends itself well to the task of better understanding how the studied reform has been interpreted and rationalised by those affected by it.

I argue that an interpretive approach is a good fit with my use of a constructivist institutionalist perspective to understand the mechanisms of organisational change.88 Interpretive policy analysts and constructivist institutionalists share many of the same concerns, such as their interest in the drivers and mechanisms of policy developments, the functions and limitations of individual agency, the use of symbols, rituals and myth in organisational change processes, and the mutually constitutive relationship between meaning and action.89

I further argue that an interpretive approach is particularly valuable for the study of how governance mechanisms have been framed and put to practice in the Swedish context. The policy processes I study here are multifaceted, vaguely formulated and sometimes devised and disseminated through networks of individuals from different organisations and sectors. Understanding the origins, meaning and impacts of these developments requires a research approach that takes into account a multitude of activities, values, interpretations and explanations. Other scholars, too, have suggested that interpretive approaches are for these reasons well suited to the study of governance.90 Political scientist Mark Bevir suggests that they may be particularly useful for highlighting how governance mechanisms take different forms in different settings, depending on the countries or organisations that adopt them.91 A more positivist research design would be ill-fit for this purpose, as would any approach that relies too heavily on existing theory, causing dissonant explanations and local variations to be overlooked.92

Moreover, and as noted above, the governance literature had tended to overlook the micro-perspective in its explanations of the international spread of governance mechanisms. I argue that using an interpretive approach that examines how individual actors have interpreted and rationalised governance reforms enables me to complement the existing literature with an important, micro-level perspective on how these ideas have been understood and motivated in Sweden.

88 For examples of other arguments in favour of this combination of perspectives, see e.g. Bevir 2010, Interpretive Political Science; Bevir & Rhodes 2010, ch.2; DiMaggio & Powell 1991; Hay 2011, ‘Interpreting Interpretivism Interpreting Interpretations: The New Hermeneutics of Public Administration’, Public Administration; Powell & Colyvas 2008; Powell & Renup 2017.
89 Bevir & Rhodes 2010, ch.2; Hay 2011.
92 Hajer & Wagenaar 2003.
Data and levels of study

This study builds on two types of data. One data set consists of policy texts where the reform ideas have been articulated, alongside written consultation responses where civil society organisations offered their opinions on these. This part of the analysis provides insights about the formal ‘framing’ of the attempted reform,93 as expressed in texts by public sector actors and civil society stakeholders. The second data source is an interview study through which I investigate the meaning and implications of the reform attempts from the perspectives of affected actors in the public sector and civil society.

Whilst the focus of this study is public sector reform, I argue that incorporating the civil society perspective is important here. This is because civil society organisations have been instrumental in shaping and disseminating the reform ideas whilst also being directly affected by their outcomes. As such, civil society representatives are uniquely posed to reflect both on the reform’s meaning and on its impact on the public sector-civil society relationship.

The study has been conducted at two levels of government. The main focal point is policy making in health and social care at the national level. In addition, I have carried out a smaller sub-study examining the reform ideas’ reception at the local level in Uppsala local authority. The reason for incorporating the local level in the study is that the vast majority of public sector-civil society interactions in Sweden take place at the local level. Swedish local authorities enjoy a significant degree of autonomy, with the majority of public services in health and social care being provided at the local and regional level and funded by local taxation.94 It is also at the local level that the majority of civil society organisations are active95, and it is from local authorities that they derive a large share of their funding.96 The local and the national levels differ both in their reasons for public sector-civil society interactions and in the types of organisations involved in these interactions. Both aspects can be expected to influence the way the reform ideas have been interpreted and implemented in the studied settings.

Interviews were conducted in four phases. The first two rounds of national-level interviews took place in 2009 and 201197 as part of a separate research project.98 Interviews in Uppsala were carried out in 2014, with one follow-up

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95 A study by the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällestör, MUCF) found that 61% of voluntary organisations (ideella organisationer) self-defined as locally based in 2014. In 2012 the figure was 68%. Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällestör 2014.
97 The 2011 interviews were conducted by Marie Nordfeldt, then at Ersta Sköndal University College.
98 This was a follow-up study of the Agreement between the Swedish Government, national idea-based organisations in the social sphere and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions conducted by Ersta Sköndal University College and commissioned by the Agreement secretariat. See Gavelin 2010, Uppföljning av överenskommelsen mellan
interview conducted in 2017. A final round of national-level interviews took place in the autumn and winter of 2016-2017. A total of 82 interviews with 72 individuals from civil society and the public sector have been conducted.

1.4 Disposition

In the next chapter I give a more detailed introduction to the two bodies of literature used in this thesis: the governance research literature and different branches of constructivist institutionalism in organisational analysis. Following a presentation of these research fields, I then present the theoretical questions and concepts that form the analytical framework for the study.

Chapter three presents the methodological considerations that have shaped the research design, alongside a stepwise account of the research process: the selection, collection and analysis of texts and interview data.

Chapter four provides an overview of the social, political and institutional context for the study. Here, I outline developments in the public sector and civil society that led up to the policy events I focus on, introduce some of the key concepts used to describe Swedish civil society and explain how they have changed in recent years. In this chapter I also introduce existing research on the changing public sector-civil society relationship in Sweden and explain where this study fits into that field.

Chapter five addresses how the reform has been framed in policy texts and consultation responses, and how the reform ideas have been interpreted by affected actors in the public sector and civil society. As such, the chapter begins to answer the first research question: how can we understand the reform ideas’ appeal to instigators and target audiences?

In chapter six I continue this investigation by examining the institutional pressures by which the reform ideas have spread between organisations. Building on interview data complemented with organisational documentation, the chapter describes how different dissemination channels are seen by affected actors to have interplayed in spreading awareness of and prompting different responses to the reform ideas.

Chapter seven addresses my second research question: has the attempted reform been seen by affected actors to bring about any changes to the public sector-civil society relationship in the affected policy areas? This is done through an analysis of interview respondents’ perceptions of developments in the public sector-civil society relationship in the years following the Swedish Government’s endorsement of the reform agenda. Here, I describe respondents’ perceptions of change and continuity in the public-sector civil society relationship.
relationship, alongside the issues and remaining challenges they list as obstacles to the reform ideas having the intended impacts.

In chapter eight, I summarise the findings of the study and address my theoretical research problem, examining how the multi-level, cross-sector settings in which the reform was formulated and disseminated appear to have affected how public sector and civil society organisations have responded to and implemented its ideas.
2. Theoretical tools and perspectives

This chapter presents the two main bodies of literature that I draw on in this study: governance research, which describes and analyses policy developments similar to those I investigate, and the constructivist institutionalist literature, with which I share an ambition to understand how ideas and practices spread between and take new forms in different organisational settings. After setting out my reasons for turning to these two research fields and explaining why I think they can be joined to good effect, I present the questions and concepts that form the analytical framework for this study.

2.1 Governance research

As outlined in the introductory chapter, a premise of this project is that the studied attempts to reform civil society’s involvement in public decision making in Sweden can be understood as symptoms of the so-called governance turn in public administrations. Here, ‘governance’ refers to an approach to public administration characterised by horizontal decision making and steering, whereby stakeholders from different sectors and levels of government contribute through processes that are portrayed as less rigid and hierarchical than traditional public administration practices.

There is a sizeable literature dealing with the drivers and nature of governance as a public management approach. Most theories of its origins take a macro-level perspective, pointing to the growth of social, political and economic interdependencies in the face of a globalised political and economic climate. It is argued that the most challenging problems facing today’s societies, such as climate change, migration and political instability, flout the traditional boundaries between nations and sectors, and can only be addressed through cooperation across these divides. This is said to have necessitated new collaborations and partnerships, forcing a shift of emphasis away from the traditional structures of government towards more flexible and interactive decision-making practices.

Democratic implications of governance

Another factor said to have contributed to the rise of governance is a widely observed democratic deficit, manifested among other ways in a decline in party-political membership and citizens’ trust in politicians. On finding representative democratic mechanisms inadequate for gaining their citizens’ trust, governments have been said to turn to other measures, often inspired by direct and deliberative democratic models, to build legitimacy. Across public sectors, the interactive working methods associated with governance have thus been promoted as means of achieving better or more legitimate public outcomes in the face of complex policy challenges.

This is also how they have been depicted in the more normative factions of the governance literature and the deliberative democracy literature, where scholars have sought not only to describe these mechanisms but to identify success factors and impart guidance to practitioners. These scholars have stressed the benefits to be gained from making public decision making open to input from broader groups of stakeholders. A central argument here is that bringing stakeholders together around a common problem, thereby ensuring that they share a purpose and bring a range of different insights and expertise to the table, enables the generation of more efficient solutions to policy issues than a government could arrive at alone.

Yet scholars’ opinions about the democratic implications of governance are divided, and these positive accounts have not stood unchallenged. Scholars have pointed out that for governance networks to fulfil their potential they must be composed and executed near-perfectly: steered by competent leaders, free from conflict and tension, populated by diligent and patient participants, and taking place in a politically stable climate. In reality, such perfect conditions rarely exist, making any promises of inclusivity and democratic benefits inherent in the governance idea difficult to realise fully.

Indeed, empirical studies of governance networks have found that they often fail to live up to democratic standards of inclusion and equality. Political scientists Jon Pierre and Göran Sundström point to a series of studies of governance practices carried out in Sweden and the EU that appeared to dispute the notion that actors involved in the same governance networks share a common purpose and thereby work towards the same goals. More often, Pierre and Sundström argue, participants of policy networks bring disparate goals and

103 Bevir 2006.
106 Sørensen & Torfing 2007a, p.13.
108 Ibid.
perspectives, posing significant challenges of coordination and negotiation for those – usually government representatives – who are tasked with organising them. Such conflicts of interests are said to pose particular problems to governance networks, which tend to lack the legitimacy-enhancing mechanisms that are built into the representative system of government, such as interest aggregation and formal representation. The notion that governance offers more transparency than the traditional system of government has thus been dismissed with the argument that its defining characteristics pose both opportunities and obstacles to openness. Whilst taking a more interactive approach to decision making may make governments appear more open to external influence, the ad-hoc, flexible character of many of these practices makes it harder to track how decisions are made and establish accountability for decisions and services.

A related problem is that governance networks can give the impression that the power balance between participants is more equal than is really the case. Critics have pointed out that it tends to be public bodies that are responsible for initiating and sustaining these networks, meaning that they are also in charge of setting the boundaries and, often, the agenda, for them. Indeed, the studies cited by Pierre and Sundström above all found evidence of some element of coercion, inequality and power exertion – far from the egalitarian ideal conveyed elsewhere in the governance literature.

As argued by political scientist Mark Bevir, such findings suggest that rather than redistributing power among broader groups of stakeholders, governance constitutes “an elite project based on expert assertions that it is an efficient and effective mode of governing”. As such, Bevir contends that governance “borrows the language of radical democracy while missing its spirits”.

A further problematic aspect of so-called governance networks is that they place high demands on the participating actors. They require that stakeholders have the capacity and resources to take part in them, whilst at the same time retaining the independence required to question and criticise power holders where necessary. As we will see, such demands can prove particularly challenging for civil society organisations, which are often resource-poor or in a position of dependence upon the public bodies seeking their input.

Despite these objections, the impacts of the governance turn on public administrations have been said to reach far beyond the policy networks and collaborations that are its most obvious manifestations, affecting not only the practices of government but also its underlying values. On some level at least, governance has been said to have contributed to a shift of power away from the

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109 Ibid.
111 E.g. Osborne 2010, p.422-424; Pestoff & Brandsen 2010.
113 As described by Bevir 2006; Sørensen & Torfing 2007a, p.11-13.
115 Lundåsen 2010b; Zimmer 2008.
political centre, a blurring of boundaries between sectors and levels of government, and a changed relationship between politicians, civil servants and external actors.  

Consequently, the proliferation of governance practices across the world in the past couple of decades are said to pose challenges both to established democratic institutions and, by extension, to the scholars seeking to make sense of them. As political scientist John Dryzek has noted, governance appears to undermine the very foundation of democratic theories grounded in notions of state sovereignty, representativeness, accountability and constitutionalism, calling for new ways to think about democracy and democratisation.

Other scholars have questioned the idea that the rise of governance implies a weakening of state sovereignty. It has been pointed out that certain developments in the early twenty-first century, such as mounting international security concerns, the “war on terror” and economic crises, rather seem to have inspired a reassertion of the state, as exemplified by a rise of isolationist tendencies in the US, Europe and elsewhere. It may thus be that the observed impacts of governance on public decision making and service delivery are confined to particular policy areas; with others, such as security, moving in quite a different direction.

Is governance new?

As noted in the introductory chapter, the extent to which governance can be considered a new phenomenon differs significantly between settings. So does the extent to which it is seen as a challenge to representative democracy, or rather as complementary to it. It has been argued that the hierarchical and centralised structures attributed to traditional government and the more horizontal mechanisms associated with governance are not mutually exclusive but tend to coexist. In fact, the purported contrasts between ‘old’ and ‘new’ systems of government are often exaggerated. Scholars have pointed out that the ideal of the traditional, hierarchical bureaucracy, with clear and linear accountability...
structures, was always at least partly a fiction.\textsuperscript{123} The formal separation of politics from public administration served to obscure decision-making powers, apart from at the top of the hierarchy; but that does not mean that this responsibility was not dispersed at other levels and among other actors, too.\textsuperscript{124} It follows from these arguments that any given instance of policy making and service delivery is likely to contain elements of both ‘government’ and ‘governance’; the balance of the mix depending on the country, sector, issue, the actors involved, and the relative stability of the policy area.\textsuperscript{125}

There has consequently been some debate in Swedish academic communities about whether one can really talk of a ‘governance turn’ in the Swedish public sector – a setting with a long-established tradition of collaborative, consensus-driven decision making, where at least some interest groups have enjoyed considerable access and influence.\textsuperscript{126} In forthcoming chapters, I seek to contribute to these discussions, by commenting on the extent to which the studied reform attempts should be seen as a departure from, or rather a continuation of, the Swedish model of state-civil society interactions. I ground these insights in a micro-level analysis of individual actors’ interpretations of the attempted reform of civil society involvement practices.

2.2 Constructivist institutionalist perspectives on organisational change

As noted, a modernist/rationalist perspective would perceive public decisions, policies and reforms as responses to existing or foreseen issues or problems. That is, adopting such a perspective implies an expectation that organisations are both intentional and rational, and that when problems emerge in society or within an administration, decision makers respond in the ways they deem most likely to deliver the best results.\textsuperscript{127}

Constructivist institutionalists, as we know, have proposed an alternative interpretation of what drives organisational behaviour. They suggest that rather than basing decisions on rationalistic calculations of what will produce the best outcome, following a ‘logic of consequentiality’, people in organisations are more likely to operate from a ‘logic of appropriateness’.\textsuperscript{128} This implies that their values and actions are more likely to be guided by what is considered most

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{124} Robert D. Behn calls the fact that civil servants have always played a part in making decisions the “dirty secret of public administration”, Behn 1998, p.143.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Jacobsson, Pierre & Sundström 2015; Pierre & Sundström 2009.
\item \textsuperscript{126} See chapter one and four for more details of these discussions.
\item \textsuperscript{127} Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson 2000, ‘Constructing organizations: The example of public sector reform.’ \textit{Organization Studies}.
\item \textsuperscript{128} March & Olsen 1998, 2009.
\end{itemize}
appropriate in their field and time, than predictions of what will produce the best outcome.

My analytical tools are drawn primarily from the work of this latter group of theorists. Under the bracket of constructivist institutionalism I include the North American sociological institutionalists129 that were influential early challengers of the rational-choice paradigm that dominated early organisational studies.130 I also include scholars that have theorised organisational change in terms of fashion,131 and those belonging to the so-called Scandinavian school of new institutionalism.132 The latter group has shifted the focus of organisational analysis away from questions about how and why ideas travel between organisations, the supply side of organisational change, to the recipient-side, by examining what happens when ideas are adopted by and implemented in organisations.133

Each of these overlapping branches of constructivist institutionalism brings something different to my analysis, and each has its limitations. The North American sociological institutionalists provide influential theories of how ideas travel between organisations and what drives organisations to adopt them. An example is Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell’s categorisation of the coercive, mimetic and normative processes by which organisations in a given field become more alike.134 They define coercive mechanisms as the formal and informal pressures exerted on organisations through means such as regulations, auditing, cultural norms and stakeholders’ expectations. Coercive forces tend to be linked to organisations’ quest for legitimacy and their ambition to comply with the administrative or cultural standards dominating their field.135 The second mechanism identified by DiMaggio and Powell is mimetic processes, which refers to organisations’ tendency to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity by copying the rhetoric or practices of other, seemingly successful, organisations.136 The third mechanism is normative pressures, referring to the processes by which members of an occupation create shared rules and practices to guide their work, also referred to as professionalisation processes.137
this is the role played by specialist professional groups, such as consultants, practitioners or academics, in the diffusion of ideas and practices.

Another relevant theme emanating from the North American literature is theories about decoupling; the gaps that sometimes emerge between the formal, rationalised front presented by organisations and their actual activities.\textsuperscript{138} A critique that has been levelled against the North American sociological institutionalists is that they pay too much attention to the dissemination of ideas and practices in organisational fields and on the impact of macro-processes on organisational behaviour, whilst overlooking what happens when they arrive in organisations. That is, their predominant focus has been the mechanisms by which external pressures are exerted on individual organisations, rather than how organisations’ internal dynamics shape their responses to such pressures.\textsuperscript{139} They have also been criticised for paying insufficient attention to the origins of new organisational trends: the reasons why certain ideas become popular and start to spread between organisations while others do not.\textsuperscript{140}

It has further been suggested that sociological institutionalists have neglected to sufficiently address the role of individual agency in organisational change processes. That is, they have tended to dismiss or overlook how individual actors’ values, interests, desires, insecurities and choices shape organisations’ responses to new ideas and practices.\textsuperscript{141} And yet, as pointed out by organisational theorist Kjell Arne Røvik, the sociological institutionalists’ theories are nevertheless underpinned by strong assumptions about the behavioural dynamics that guide organisational change processes. They tend, for instance, to emphasise the role of mimetic forces in driving organisational change, yet their inclination towards large-scale, quantitative research studies has not provided the empirical evidence to back these theories up.\textsuperscript{142}

It should be acknowledged that since the 1990s, some efforts have been made to redress these shortcomings. These have taken the form of repeated calls for an improved micro-foundation of institutional analysis among the sociological institutionalists,\textsuperscript{143} a range of studies responding to these calls\textsuperscript{144} and the micro-level research conducted within the so-called Scandinavian school of new institutionalism, to be presented below.

Another group of scholars have theorised organisational behaviour in terms of fashion, suggesting that when organisations change they do so not only to comply with norms of appropriateness, but as pioneers and followers of

\textsuperscript{138} Meyer & Rowan 1977; Christensen & Laegreid, 2003; Tomson 2008.
\textsuperscript{139} Greenwood & Hinings 1996, p.1023.
\textsuperscript{140} Powell & Colyvas 2008; Røvik 2008, p.22-23. However, some efforts have been made to redress this; see e.g. Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings 2002.
\textsuperscript{142} Røvik 2008, p.21-23.
fashion. The fashion-metaphor has been used to highlight the transitory tendencies of many organisational change processes; the way ideas or practices can gain widespread popularity, sometimes on a global scale, before relatively quickly falling out of fashion. This perspective draws attention to how individuals in organisations appear to respond to new or returning organisational ideas and practices in similar ways to how people respond to cultural or technological fashions.

This branch of the literature has also met criticism, however, both on methodological grounds and because of the assumptions it makes about how fashions function and how organisations respond to them. The latter criticisms have focused on the assumption, often implicit in these theories, that organisational fashions by definition are temporary and superficial, thus precluding the possibility that they leave a lasting and substantive impact on the organisations that adopt them.

The methodological critique has concentrated on how the empirical research that underpins the fashion analogy has tended to focus on the discursive expressions of organisational trends. That is, scholars have studied how ideas or concepts appear in and disappear from organisations’ language, and have interpreted these fluctuations as the comings and goings of organisational fashions. Critics have pointed out that not only are such methods highly dependent on the quality and comprehensiveness of the databases used, but focusing on the prevalence of certain ideas in texts comes with the risk of both over- and underestimating their import. This is because an idea that appears to be widely accepted and used on the basis of such an analysis, may in reality have little influence over the affected organisations’ practices. Equally, a trend that based on its prevalence in organisational documentation appears to be on the decline, may still be widely practiced – only without its value or usage being continuously mentioned in texts.

The Scandinavian school of constructivist institutionalism, finally, has addressed some of the mentioned shortcomings of the sociological institutionalist literature, by putting more focus on the agency and behaviour of both organisations and individuals at the recipient-end of institutional change processes. Making more use of interpretive, micro-level case studies, these scholars have shown that organisations and individuals within them tend to have more control over the adoption of new ideas and practices than the earlier, and in particular North American, literature gave them credit for. They have found that rather than simply incorporating ready-made ideas and practices in their

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146 Abrahamson 2011; Sahlin & Wedlin 2008.
148 Some have used quantitative content analyses methods, such as Print Media Indicators (PMI) to capture fluctuations in usage of certain terms in organisational texts. See e.g. Abrahamson 1996a, ‘Management Fashion’, Academy of Management Review; Benders, Nijholt & Heusinkveld 2007, ‘Using print media indicators in management fashion research’, Quality & Quantity. For a discussion about the pitfalls of these methods, see Benders et al. 2007; Røvik 2011.
149 Benders et al. 2007.
150 Røvik 2011, 2013
151 Ibid.
original form, there is scope for organisations to edit them to suit their traditions and purposes, and to be creative and innovative in doing so. From this follows that when ideas spread between organisations, they change and gain new meanings in their new settings. The concept of translation has been highly influential here, representing an interest in the variation of practices and outcomes that result from ideas being interpreted and put to practice differently in different organisational settings. This perspective builds on the observation that, contrary to the early sociological institutionalist scholars’ assumption that organisations in related fields tend to experience a convergence of values and practices, the outcome is often instead a diversity of interpretations and adaptations. And while different organisations’ adaptations of an organisational idea may appear alike at the rhetorical level, a closer study is likely to reveal that they differ considerably in how they are interpreted and applied.

It has been suggested, however, that this perspective, too, has been overly reductive in its focus on the micro-level, recipient side of idea implementation, and its relative lack of interest in the conditions and mechanisms that make ideas travel. In particular, scholars studying translation processes have tended to pay relatively little attention to how macro-level developments, such as economic crises, ideology or social change, affect which ideas spread or how organisations respond to new ideas and practices.

Since my interests lay both in why and how ideas come to travel between settings and what guides organisations’ responses to them, my analytical framework contains concepts and theories drawn from each of these branches of constructivist institutionalism.

A pragmatic, micro-level perspective

My analysis of how the studied reform has been framed, disseminated, interpreted and implemented draws on each of the theoretical branches outlined above, whilst also keeping an open mind to findings that support different theoretical perspectives, including a more rationalist understanding of organisational behaviour. As such, the theoretical lens applied in this thesis is closer to what Kjell Arne Røvik labels a “pragmatic” institutionalism. This is an approach to organisational analysis that declines to side exclusively with either a rationalist or a constructivist understanding of how organisations, and the individuals within them, operate. Instead it implies an expectation that different logics and forces – both the logic of appropriateness

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155 Røvik 2008, p.23. For other critiques of the sociological institutionalists' tendency to emphasise convergence and isomorphism while paying less attention to evidence of heterogeneity in organisational outcomes, including attempts within the field to address these shortcoming, see e.g. Czarniawska 2008 p.771-772; Greenwood and Hinings 1996, p.1027; Greenwood, Suddaby and Hinings 2002, p.59-60; Oliver 1991, p.149-151.
156 Røvik 2008, p.32-33.
157 Ibid.
158 Røvik 2008.
and the logic of expected outcomes; both field forces and intentional force – come
into play in guiding what ideas and practices become popular and how they are
incorporated into organisations.\textsuperscript{159} What such an approach lacks in meta-
theoretical coherence, it may, it is suggested, win in explanatory power.\textsuperscript{160} To
apply it means letting empirical observations in conjunction with an openness to
different explanatory theories guide the analysis, in the hope that this will lead to
a fuller and more nuanced picture of how and why organisations adapt and
change.

A number of scholars have advocated a complimentary approach to these
different metatheoretical perspectives.\textsuperscript{161} Some have proposed that the
applicability of the different perspectives depends on the organisational field.
For instance, sociologist John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan have suggested that
public sector organisations are more likely to be driven by norms of appropriate
behaviour than strict efficiency measures. This is so because their production is
not easily quantified and evaluated, which means that they are judged, and
consequently rewarded, more on their ability to appear trustworthy and
legitimate than on what they actually deliver.\textsuperscript{162} Others have suggested that
outcome-oriented and norm-driven motivations may be at play at different
stages of an organisational change process.\textsuperscript{163} For instance, it has been suggested
that rationalist considerations pertaining to organisational efficiency are more
likely to come into play in driving the emergence of new ideas and practices,
particularly when these respond to clearly defined problems.\textsuperscript{164} Rationalist
arguments highlighting potential negative outcomes are also likely to arise when
organisations reject a new idea or practice on account of it not appearing to be
functional.\textsuperscript{165} They may be less useful for explaining the form that new ideas
take, however, which is where a constructivist perspective, highlighting how
social norms influence organisational behaviour, is more useful.\textsuperscript{166} A discussion
on this topic based on the findings of this study is offered in chapter eight.

\textsuperscript{159} Czarniawska 2008; Powell & Colyvas 2008; Røvik 2008: 44-47.
\textsuperscript{160} Czarniawska 2008; Jupille, Caporaso & Checkel 2003, ‘Integrating institutions: rationalism, constructivism, and the
\textsuperscript{161} Czarniawska 2008; Jupille, Caporaso & Checkel 2003; March & Olsen 2009; Oliver 1991; Røvik 2008; Tallberg
2010.
\textsuperscript{162} Meyer & Rowan 1977, p.354-359. See also Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings 2002, p.75; Oliver 1991, p.165-166.
\textsuperscript{163} March & Olsen 1998; Tallberg 2010, p.638.
\textsuperscript{164} March & Olsen 1998, p.965-966.
\textsuperscript{165} Oliver 1991, p.156-157.
\textsuperscript{166} March & Olsen 1998.
2.3 Analytical questions and concepts

The analytical framework presented over the following pages is divided into four sections. In the first, I briefly examine the meaning of ‘reform’. This is done to enable a later discussion about whether this is a suitable label for the policy developments examined in this thesis. The second section outlines how analysing the way a reform has been ‘framed’ can help explain its appeal to instigators, advocates and target audiences. The third section addresses the concept of ‘institutional pressures’ through which ideas and practices arrive in organisations, and describes the different and often complementary functions that different types of pressure may play. Finally, the fourth section explores what happens when new ideas or practices arrive in organisations, how organisations respond to institutional pressures to change, and what conditions may guide their responses.

Some of these sections contain sub-headings that thematically present pertinent concepts and themes drawn from the literature. Importantly, these should be read as complementary ways of approaching the topics at hand and not as competing explanatory theories.

Lastly, it should be remembered that when these questions and concepts are applied in the analysis of research findings in later chapters, the focus throughout is on affected actors’ interpretations of these different dimensions of organisational change processes. No attempts are made to objectively measure their presence and impacts in the studied settings.

What is a reform?

In this thesis, I refer to the studied attempts to review and revise civil society’s involvement in public decision making alternately as ‘reform ideas’, ‘intended reforms’ and ‘reform attempts’. Choosing a label to describe these policy developments has not been straightforward, however. As will be demonstrated in chapter five, the written articulations of the reform agenda were vaguely formulated, and interview respondents were often unclear about precisely what changes were sought and why. Thus, to help settle the question of labelling, I here make a brief detour to the public administration literature concerned with the emergence and implementation of reforms.

It is notable that despite the reform concept’s ubiquity in this literature, it is often left undefined. Whilst scholars take a keen interest in the origins, functions, implementation and effects of reforms, the meaning of the term appears taken for granted. A dictionary search reveals that a reform is to be understood as “an improvement … in a person's behaviour or in the structure of something”.167 Yet including a substantive improvement-criterion arguably makes the definition too narrow to be usefully applied in public administration

settings, where the meaning and consequences of policy developments is always the subject of divergent interpretations. There will invariably be disagreements on what constitutes an improvement in any given situation. Moreover, a reform carried out with the intent of improvement will not by necessity lead to the intended results, yet remains, on paper, a reform.

Acknowledging such reservations, public management scholars Christopher Pollitt and Geert Bouckaert have defined public management reforms as “deliberate changes to the structures and processes of public sector organizations with the objective of getting them (in some sense) to run better”. The “in some sense”-clause is inserted to account for the fact that improvements usually involve some level of trade-off between priorities, and that opinions about which priorities should prevail tend to differ.

A slightly different perspective on this discussion is offered by organisational theorists Nils Brunsson and Johan P Olsen in the book *Makten att reformera.* They suggest that the traditional conception of administrative reforms, along the lines of Pollitt and Bouckaert’s definition above, is rooted in an understanding of organisational change as resulting from conscious and rational choices. Its basis, in other words, is the assumption that organisations operate out of a logic of expected outcomes. From this point of view, reforms are decided on by leaders and implemented by their staff in a clear and predictable manner. Yet Brunsson and Olsen challenge this interpretation of organisations as rational and goal-oriented, and of reforms as the steps they take on the road to improvement. They argue that the connection between reform attempts and organisational change tends to be weaker than the traditional conception of the term suggests. This is because, they note, “many changes are not the result of reforms and many reform attempts do not lead to any changes”.

Brunsson and Olsen propose that while reforms may be an institutionalised and omnipresent part of modern public organisations, they are not so much steps taken towards improvement as expressions of organisations’ efforts to adapt to the expectations and norms of their surroundings and members. From this follows that when organisations change, they are less likely to do so as a result of individual agents’ rational and freely chosen decisions, than their responses to the multiple, often conflicting, institutional pressures that dominate their organisational field at that moment in time.

In this sense, reforms can be understood as much as expressions of organisations’ powerlessness in the face of such forces, as of individual change agents’ power to decide over the fate of their organisations and subordinates. Equally, administrative reforms can be seen as less of a response to emerging problems or an existing practice that is not working, than expressions of the dominant ideas about what practices are most suitable in that moment in time.

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170 Ibid., p.13.
171 Ibid., p.14; my translation.
For these reasons, Brunsson and Olsen suggest that reforms belong more to the world of ideas than to the world of practice.\textsuperscript{172}

In chapter five I make use of these discussions to explain why I consider the reform concept an appropriate denomination for the policy developments in focus in this study.

The ‘framing’ of reforms

Key to this study is an ambition to understand why and how ideas about reforming civil society’s involvement in decision making have attracted attention in the Swedish public sector. In other words: how can we understand the reform’s appeal to those affected by it? My starting point for addressing this question is to make visible and analyse how the reform ideas have been framed and packaged. By ‘framed’ I refer to the processes by which the attempted reform has been articulated, justified and presented by its instigators and advocates.\textsuperscript{173} The purpose of such a process is to distil new ideas or practices “into understandable and compelling formats”,\textsuperscript{174} in order to convince target audiences of their value and legitimacy.

In the context of constructivist institutionalism, examining how a new idea or practice is framed implies an expectation that its formal presentation does not necessarily provide an accurate or complete representation of the motives that underlie its emergence, or indeed is a good predictor of its subsequent effects. Rather, it is expected that what is emphasised in the framing of a reform – for instance, efficiency outcomes, democratic legitimacy, or benefits for a particular group or cause – is a function of the given situation, the norms and traditions of the organisational field and the priorities of those devising the reform as well as those targeted by it.\textsuperscript{175} In the following, I present some complementary strands of theory that I use in forthcoming chapters in my analysis of how the studied reform has been framed and packaged.

Ideas as solutions to shared problems, or ideas as solutions looking for problems?

Scholars of organisational change processes have sought to explain what causes organisations to abandon established ideas and practices in favour of new alternatives.\textsuperscript{176} In this endeavour, it is often concluded that organisations are most likely to change their ways when they experience a specific problem or issue

\textsuperscript{172} Brunsson & Olsen 1990, ch.12.

\textsuperscript{173} E.g. Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings 2002; Hajer & Laws 2008; Sahlin & Wedlin 2008. Institutional scholars have provided alternative ways of conceptualising this process, such as Strang & Meyer’s ‘theorising’ concept, used to describe the act by which a need for change is articulated and new solutions proposed. See Strang & Meyer 1993, ‘Institutional Conditions for Diffusion’, Theory and Society.

\textsuperscript{174} Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings 2002, p.60-61, 75.


\textsuperscript{176} Developments sometimes referred to as ‘deinstitutionalisation’ and ‘reinstitutionalisation’; see e.g. Oliver 1992, ‘The Antecedents of Deinstitutionalization’, Organization Studies; Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings 2002.
that needs addressing. Such situations have been described as ‘crises’, ‘opportunities’ or ‘jolts’: events that prompt established ideas or practices to be questioned and new alternatives to emerge. From this follows that when many organisations experience similar problems or changes in circumstances, they are likely to look to each other for inspiration on how these issues should be addressed.

Yet applying a constructivist perspective to organisational analysis implies an expectation that ideas and practices become popular not only because many organisations share the same problems to which they seek similar solutions. Rather, practices and ideas may also spread independently of the shared, instrumental problems or the hunt for efficiency assumed by a rationalist perspective. In other words, they are likely to have other qualities that make them appealing to organisations. New practices may be lending organisations an appearance of progressiveness, for instance, or providing under-stimulated officials with the opportunity to reinvent some aspect of their work.

As Michael D. Cohen, James G. March and Johan P. Olsen famously suggested in 1972, organisations change not only in response to problems seeking a solution, but also as a result of “choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work”.

Other scholars, too, have proposed that an analytical distinction should be drawn between organisational change that is triggered by a problem or crisis calling for new solutions, and when it is triggered by the influx of new ideas and values into the organisation. Such influxes of ideas are sometimes referred to as institutional ‘pressures’ or ‘demands’; concepts explored below. It has been suggested that new ideas and practices are more likely to catch on in a field or an organisation if they are framed as responding to a specified problem. At times, however, a problem and solution are delivered as a package, ensuring that those who are not aware of the need for change will be persuaded both that a problem exists, and how it should best be solved. This means that where there is no spontaneous demand for change, generated, for instance, in response to observed performance failures within an organisation or events in the external environment to which the organisation must adapt, such a demand can be generated by the way a new idea or practice is framed and by the persuasive

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182 Oliver 1991; Pache & Santos 2010.
powers of those who promote it. A consequence of this is that fully functioning practices may be discarded and replaced in the name of modernisation.\footnote{Equally, firmly embedded practices supported by a highly committed workforce may create a bias against modernisation and change, what March and Olsen call “the competency trap”. See March & Olsen 1998, p.965-966.}

Again, these different dynamics may be associated with different behavioural logics, if only loosely so. When a reform is promoted without explicit links to any observed performance failures, its appeal can likely be attributed to a logic of appropriateness. It may, for instance, be endorsed on the strength of its appearance as a timely modernisation initiative, or it may be adopted by organisational actors seeking to display adherence to internal or external institutional pressures. When, by contrast, a reform is framed as a response to an acknowledged problem in the organisation or environment, its endorsement by organisational actors is more likely to be informed by a logic of expected outcomes. As acknowledged above, however, even if the search for a solution is indeed driven by a logic of expected outcomes, the framing of the problem and the form that the solution takes are likely to be products of the administrative or cultural standards dominating the field at that moment in time, and, as such, will be steered by a logic of appropriateness.\footnote{Jupille, Caporaso & Checkel 2003; March & Olsen 1998.} The two logics, in other words, are perpetually muddled.\footnote{Røvik labels this an “essential ambiguity” that he suggests is an inherent feature underlying much actor behaviour. Røvik 2008, p.45.}

In chapters five and eight I explore whether the reform ideas under investigation here are best understood as solutions to shared problems or as solutions looking for problems. In doing so, I also seek to shine light on what balance of logics (outcome-oriented vs norm-driven) and demand (spontaneous vs. generated) have been at play in the framing, dissemination and implementation of the attempts to reform civil society involvement in decision making in the fields of health and social care. In the expectation that different public bodies and the individuals within them will use different logics for adopting or rejecting the promoted reform, I will also explore how the way the reform ideas have been framed and interpreted is seen to have affected their implementation and outcomes.

**Myths, symbols and purposeful ambiguity**

As suggested in chapter one, constructivist institutionalists tend to concede that whatever logic underlies an organisation’s activities, the front they present to the world is likely to remain one of rational intentionality. This recognition underlies the coining of the term *rationalised myths*, referring to socially legitimated practices that spread between organisations precisely on the basis that they purport to offer rational, tried-and-tested solutions to some present need.\footnote{Christensen et al. 2007; Czarniawska & Joerges 1996, ‘Travels of Ideas’, in Czarniawska & Sevon (eds) Translating Organizational Change; Meyer & Rowan 1977.} As suggested by the use of the word *myth*, however, such ideas and practices do not always live up to their promises. They may be difficult to
realise, lead to unintended consequences, or clash with the traditional ways of working in the organisation.\(^\text{189}\)

Constructivist institutionalists have suggested that ideas and practices that spread in this way take on a symbolic flavour, signalling that the organisations that adopt them are progressive, modern and successful, without these claims necessarily needing to be verified. In the case of public administration reform, symbolic language may be present, both in the articulation and framing of reform ideas, where it serves to enhance the reform’s appeal to target audiences, and in the rhetoric of the recipient organisation, where it serves to demonstrate their adherence to the new ideas.\(^\text{190}\)

From these observations follows that an idea’s popularity and reach are not necessarily good indicators of its operability or practical value. On the contrary, as Meyer has argued, it may be that what makes an idea fit to travel, such as its suitability for “abstraction, generality, and universality”, goes against it being workable in practice.\(^\text{191}\) “The things that make an idea a good idea,” Meyer suggests, “may often, in fact, run against making the idea good practice.”\(^\text{192}\)

This notion, that the reach of an idea’s appeal is a function of its versatility – the degree to which it can be applied and interpreted in different ways to suit different settings – also finds resonance in the work of interpretive policy analysts; my chosen field of methodological inspiration. As will be explored in the next chapter, scholars in this field have highlighted that policy writings often contain a level of purposeful ambiguity in order to be accepted, particularly in situations marked by conflicting interest and a search for consensus.\(^\text{193}\) Governance scholars, too, have touched upon this subject, showing how maintaining a degree of ambiguity and versatility in governance reforms ensures that target audiences can apply their own interpretations to both the presented problem and the proposed solution, thereby broadening the reform’s appeal.\(^\text{194}\)

In forthcoming chapters, I draw on these related strands of theory to throw light on how myth, symbolism and ambiguity have been used in the rhetoric surrounding attempts to improve civil society involvement in public decision making in Sweden. In doing so, I seek to understand in what ways such factors have contributed to the spread of the reform ideas, on the one hand, and whether they have affected their implementation and outcomes, on the other. If, for instance, we understand the idea of public-sector civil society ‘dialogue’ as a symbol or a rationalised myth – what does it symbolise that can explain its appeal? Are the normative claims that people associate with the term reflected in the practical manifestations of the reform and if so, how? Again, the focus...
throughout is on affected actors’ interpretations of events; no attempts are made to objectively measure the reach and impact of the reform ideas.

**Radical change or tweaking of established practices**

Finally, new organisational ideas and practices vary in the degree to which they are framed as a radical departure from past traditions or as more subtle tweaks, or modernisations, of established practices. Here, organisational theorists Royston Greenwood and C.R. Hinings differentiate between ‘radical’ and ‘convergent’ organisational changes; defining the former as an organisation “busting loose from an existing orientation” and the latter as it “fine tuning” the same.195

They suggest that in general terms, reforms that can be interpreted as radical challenges to an organisation’s core identity are less likely to be adopted. In order for such reforms to be accepted, they require the accompaniment of convincing ‘normative visions’ that persuade target organisations of their necessity. By contrast, reforms that can be categorised as merely technical improvements to existing practices tend, unsurprisingly perhaps, to be easier to accept.196

On a similar note, Anne-Claire Pache and Filipe Santos distinguish between institutional demands pertaining to the ‘ideological’ or the ‘functional’ level.197 The former concern what goals or values are legitimate for organisations in a field to pursue, whereas the latter pertain to the appropriate means for achieving those goals.198 Pache and Santos, too, suggest that functional demands are of a technical nature and tend to be peripheral to an organisation’s identity, thus making them fairly flexible and negotiable. Meanwhile, demands pertaining to an organisation’s goals are less easily accepted, on account of them being expressions of the organisation’s “core system of values and references”.199 They add, however, that “when technical prescriptions are so institutionalised that they become ends in themselves … conflict around these prescriptions qualifies … as a conflict around goals”.200

Thus, whether a public administration reform is framed as radical or convergent, pertaining to goals or means, can be expected to affect how organisations respond to it and how likely it is to be translated into substantive changes.201 In forthcoming chapters, these dichotomies will be applied as a means of understanding how and why the studied reform of civil society involvement practices has been interpreted and put to practice differently by different groups and organisations.

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196 Greenwood & Hinings 1996.
199 Ibid.
200 Ibid.
Institutional pressures

The previous section presented theories and concepts pertaining to how organisational ideas and practices may be framed and packaged. Their purpose was to be used in forthcoming chapters to help address the first research question posed in this thesis: *how can we understand the reform ideas’ appeal to instigators and target audiences?* In this section, focus shifts to the means by which reform ideas spread between and within organisations.

The concept of ‘institutional pressures’ refers to the formal and informal mechanisms by which ideas, values and practices influence organisational behaviour; elsewhere referred to as ‘field forces’ or ‘institutional demands’, among other denominations. These are the demands and expectations that organisations adapt to in order to achieve success and status in their field. However, the institutional pressures facing organisations tend to be numerous, often conflict, and stem from multiple sources, meaning that organisations and the individuals within them are continuously balancing different interests and values against each other. As will be discussed below, how they respond to such pressures is therefore a function of the interplay between the contents and nature of the pressures themselves, what other pressures are in circulation within or outside of the organisation and its internal dynamics.

Institutionalist scholars have offered different approaches to analysing the nature and impact of institutional pressures. Christine Oliver suggests categorising them by where they occur (*context*), why they are exerted (*cause*), what they contain (*content*), who is exerting them (*constituents*) and how or by what means they are exerted (*control*). Taking this typology as a starting point, the *cause* and *content* of the institutional pressures examined in this study are addressed in chapter five with the help of the previous section, pertaining to the framing of the reform ideas.

The *context* of the studied reform can be defined as the fields of health and social care policy in the Swedish public sector, with the added dimension that it was partly conceived and disseminated in cross-sector, multi-level networks. Whilst the reform was also promoted by more conventional means, such as through the 2009 *Civil Society Bill* and associated implementation efforts, the collaborative network approach has continued to permeate the ongoing development and dissemination of the reform ideas and associated practices.

That leaves for this section the two topics of *constituents* – who exerts the pressures – and *control* – how or by what means they are exerted. Over the
following pages, I introduce the theoretical basis for my forthcoming analysis of the institutional pressures at play in the dispersion of the studied reform ideas. I distinguish here between institutional pressures that disperse informally and those that are exerted through formal steering.\textsuperscript{209} It should be noted, however, that this distinction primarily serves an analytical purpose. In reality, different steering forms tend to both interact and overlap, making the distinction between them less clear-cut.\textsuperscript{210} For instance, formal steering activities are often preceded by informal pressures, as the decision makers who devise them are themselves subjected to demands from stakeholders, external influencers and organisational fashions. Equally, however, as organisations conform to formal steering measures such as regulations and audits, they tend to start sharing experiences and good practice with each other, thus creating new norms and, with them, new waves of informal pressures to conform.

\textbf{Informal institutional pressures}

By informal institutional pressures, I refer to ideas and practices that diffuse in society and within organisational fields without a formal connection to any official decisions to advance a particular agenda.\textsuperscript{211} Instead, they take the form of social pressures from interest groups and citizens or the informal exchanges of ideas or experiences that occur when organisations draw influence from each other or pick up ideas, values and practices from other fields. These are the mechanisms highlighted by DiMaggio and Powell in their theory of mimetic isomorphism, which describes how organisations mimic the rhetoric or practices of other, seemingly successful, organisations in their efforts to deal with uncertainty.\textsuperscript{212} They may also appear in the form of the informal sharing of good practice that occurs among colleagues and in professional networks; the informal manifestations of the normative pressures through which members of an occupation create rules and practices to guide their work.\textsuperscript{213}

However, whilst these types of institutional pressures are largely informal and can exist independently of any formal steering efforts or formal sanctions, organisations’ responses to them is not necessarily a matter of free choice. Informal pressures may be so deeply engrained in an organisational field as to become, in effect, coercive. They become ‘normative prescriptions’; social rules that are taken for granted and rarely challenged.\textsuperscript{214} In order to secure funds or be

\textsuperscript{209} C.f. Oliver’s distinction between voluntary diffusion and legal coercion (Oliver 1991, p.168-169). I consider her distinction less useful for the purpose of this study, however, as it does not capture the blurring of boundaries between coercive and voluntary steering that has been highlighted e.g. in the literature on soft regulation and discursive steering, to be discussed below.

\textsuperscript{210} C.f. Røvik 2008, p.256 on how organisational ideas often disperse and take root in a ‘spiral-like’ fashion: at times appearing as abstract ideas and visions, at other times as practical examples that may in turn be picked up and decontextualised, to then reappear in new steering initiatives, leading to new practical examples, and so on.

\textsuperscript{211} Oliver 1991, p.146-147, 168-169.

\textsuperscript{212} DiMaggio & Powell 1983, p.151. Again, for alternative conceptions of what drives mimetic processes see e.g. Brusoni and Sahlin-Andersson 2000; Czarniawska 2008; Sahlin & Wedlin 2008.

\textsuperscript{213} DiMaggio & Powell 1983, p.152.

\textsuperscript{214} Pache & Santos 2010 p.457-460.
taken seriously in their field, organisations are forced to conform to them.\textsuperscript{215} This implies that the more widely diffused and embedded informal pressures become in a field, the more likely it is that organisations will conform to them.\textsuperscript{216}

As mentioned, some constructivist institutionalists have likened the fluctuations in institutional pressures to the shifting currents of fashion.\textsuperscript{217} They suggest that rather than ideas spreading because they are intrinsically powerful, they become powerful as they travel.\textsuperscript{218} That is, the very fact that a practice is seen to be picked up by other, seemingly successful organisations in a field makes it appealing to others – the same mechanisms that drive cultural or technological fashions.

Organisational fashions are not seen to be driven by arbitrary forces, however, but are collective preferences that emerge in reaction to situations and events taking place in the organisational field or the surrounding world. When organisations follow fashions, they do so either in an effort to conform to prevailing trends or to mark themselves out as unique and at the forefront of their field.\textsuperscript{219} Eric Abrahamson has distinguished between ‘technico-economic’ and ‘socio-psychological’ drivers of organisational fashion.\textsuperscript{220} Technico-economic drivers refers to how fashions are shaped in response to threats and opportunities in the organisation and its surrounding environment.\textsuperscript{221} These may take the form of macro-economic developments or internal tensions caused by structural or technical problems within the organisation. In other words, actual or perceived problems that create the need for new solutions in the form of organisational ideas and practices. Socio-psychological drivers refer to how individuals within organisational fields develop a collective demand for new ideas or practices, as a result of shared frustrations, boredom or a desire for status or gratification.\textsuperscript{222} This distinction thus corresponds with the dichotomy between problem-driven and solution-driven motivations for change outlined above.

Whilst there have been some valid criticisms levelled against the use of the fashion analogy in organisational analysis,\textsuperscript{223} I maintain that the concept holds resonance for this study. I refer to the analytical concept of fashion because it resonates with how affected actors themselves portrayed the spread of the reform ideas in interviews. I have not sought to confirm or debunk their observations with the type of systematic content analysis sometimes used in this

\textsuperscript{215} C.f. DiMaggio & Powell’s description of the informal and subtle manifestations of coercive isomorphism, see Di-Maggio & Powell 1983, p.150-151.
\textsuperscript{216} Greenwood & Hinings 1996, p.1027-1028.
\textsuperscript{217} Abrahamson 1996b; Czarniawska & Joerges 1996; Røvik 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin 2008.
\textsuperscript{218} Sahlin & Wedlin 2008.
\textsuperscript{219} Czarniawska 2008; Røvik 2008: 25, 309-311; Sahlin & Wedlin 2008, p.223.
\textsuperscript{220} Abrahamson 1996b, p.130-135.
\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., p.134.
\textsuperscript{222} Ibid., p.131-133.
\textsuperscript{223} These criticisms pertain both to the assumptions these theories make about the fleeting and largely superficial nature of organisational fashions, and the research methods that have been used to underpin them – see section 2.2 for a summary and references.
field of research. Instead, I am interested in if, and why, the reform ideas I study are considered fashionable, and how they being given this label affects how they are interpreted and implemented. Does a reform idea being seen as fashionable make a difference to how affected actors view its value and potential impact? Can ideas or practices that are dismissed as temporary fads still impact change on public organisations’ values and practices?

**Formal steering**
Alongside informal pressures, ideas and practices also diffuse in organisational fields by means of formal steering activities. These are designed and executed by governments, supranational organisations, and professional bodies with the explicit purpose of promoting certain standards and practices in a policy area or professional field. Formal steering is often referred to as the most powerful source of institutional pressure and most likely to prompt organisations to change, on account of it being underpinned by a political mandate and often incorporating some element of legal coercion.

However, not all formal steering activities are overtly coercive in nature. The different forms that public steering may take have received much scholarly attention in recent years, in response to a reported increase in regulations, auditing and professionalisation processes said to have taken place across public sectors internationally from the 1990s onwards. In the following, I make use of Bengt Jacobsson and Göran Sundström's typology of three interrelated and mutually reinforcing dimensions of public steering – regulation, auditing and discursive steering – to differentiate between the different mechanisms through which the reform ideas have spread in the Swedish public sector.

**(Soft) regulation**
The regulations that public bodies are subjected to – by their own governments or by supranational organisations – range in character from legally binding rules to more lenient and informal measures. Scholars tend to categorise these as ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ forms of regulation. Hard regulations include laws, directives and rulings; formal measures that have a clear source and are legally binding, where non-compliance is linked to some form of formal sanction. Soft regulations, by contrast, tend to be non-hierarchical, are not legally binding, and do not impose formal sanctions on non-compliers. They are often imposed by international or supranational organisations, sometimes with the aid of private corporations or civil society actors. They tend to be less formal in character, often taking the form of proposals, conventions or agreements. This means that

224 E.g. Abrahamsson 1996a; Benders, Nijholt & Heuninkveld 2007. See section 2.2 for a brief comment on the pitfalls of such methods.
227 Jacobsson & Sundström 2006, p.82-87.
228 Brunsson & Jacobsson 2002, A World of Standards.
they are also more open to interpretation and editing on the part of those targeted by them.\textsuperscript{230} When scholars suggest that there has been an increase in public sector regulation in recent years, it is often these ‘softer’ rules that they refer to.\textsuperscript{231} The European Union is often listed as at the forefront of this trend. One example of its soft steering measures is the Open Method of Cooperation, whereby EU member states agree to work towards the same policy goals, develop shared guidelines and reporting structures, yet maintain a significant degree of autonomy in how they operationalise the joint goals.\textsuperscript{232}

The reported increase in soft regulations in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been said to represent a challenge to the clear distinction between law and non-law, and between the public and private sectors that characterise the traditional public administration model.\textsuperscript{233} As such, it has been highlighted as one of the markers of the alleged shift from traditional public administration to governance; from the democratic ideal of accountability and representation to that of inclusivity and deliberation.\textsuperscript{234} As forthcoming chapters will show, the soft regulation concept is of particular relevance for this study, which examines policy developments that have been communicated primarily through vaguely formulated proposals, agreements and directives. The intentions of these have not always been explicitly stated, leaving plenty of room for interpretation on the part of disseminators and target audiences.

**Evaluation and auditing**

Alongside the reported increase in soft regulations in public sectors in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, scholars have pointed to an interlinked explosion of another dimension of steering, namely the auditing, monitoring and evaluation of public organisations.\textsuperscript{235} Such measures tend to function as an extension of the regulations outlined above, taking the form of follow-up measures that are conducted or commissioned by the regulating body itself. They may also be initiated by independent organisations that take it upon themselves to scrutinise how public bodies fare in particular areas, such as human rights, transparency or gender equality.\textsuperscript{236}

Scholars have described the increase in the auditing of public bodies as the emergence of an ‘audit society’\textsuperscript{237} — said to have had a transformative impact on how public organisations operate, the design of public services and, by extension, on citizens’ lives.\textsuperscript{238} As noted by organisational theorists Bengt

\textsuperscript{230} Sahlin & Wedlin 2008.
\textsuperscript{232} E.g. Jacobsson & Sahlin Anderson 2006; Mörth 2006.
\textsuperscript{233} Cohen 2007, 37-38, 57-78; Mörth 2006, p.119-120
\textsuperscript{234} Palumbo 2010; Cohen 2007; Mörth 2006.
\textsuperscript{235} Power 1999.
\textsuperscript{236} Jacobsson & Sundström 2006, p.82.
\textsuperscript{237} Power 1999.
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid.; Jacobsson & Sahlin Andersson, 2006.
Jacobsson & Kerstin Sahlin, an audit society “is not only a society in which auditing is commonplace, but one in which activities are formed in such a way that they can be audited”. In other words, as public audits become a key source of legitimacy for public organisations, they increasingly design their activities in such a way that they can be measured.

The downside of this approach to public management is well documented. Put simply, it is said to encourage public organisations to prioritise activities that are quantifiable and to de-prioritise those that are not. The negative impacts of such patterns of prioritisation have been particularly noted in the health and social care sectors, where in the de-prioritised category are often found the values and outcomes that are linked to individual or social wellbeing. These tend to be highly subjective, often intangible, and thereby difficult to measure in a reliable and systematic manner.

**Discursive steering**

A third dimension of steering is that which takes place as actors share ideas, practices and advice with each other in formal settings; what Jacobsson and Sundström label ‘discursive steering’. Discursive steering occurs when actors exchange experiences and ideas in meetings, networks, conferences and training courses, but also through the production and dissemination of standards, handbooks, reports, good-practice guidelines, and similar. These activities form an essential function in the dissemination and implementation of policy ideas. They are particularly important as complements to softer forms of regulation, for which they function as a supporting infrastructure, ensuring that the promoted ideas or practices are talked about and put to practice.

Discursive steering activities thus relate to the professionalisation processes that DiMaggio and Powell described as integral to creating the normative pressures that drive organisations to take after each other and become more alike. As such, the line between discursive steering and the informal institutional pressures described above is sometimes fine; again highlighting how the different types of pressure tend to overlap and interact with each other.

Sustaining discursive steering activities are specialist professional groups such as consultants, practitioners or academics. Often, these actors are situated outside of the organisations they seek to influence – working as consultants or other types of expert advisors. They may also be individuals who move

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244 DiMaggio & Powell 1983.
between workplaces and take ideas and practices with them, or organisational members who participate in professional networks from where they draw inspiration for their own organisations. Many constructivist institutionalists, particularly of the Scandinavian school, have studied the roles that such actors play in spreading ideas and practices across organisational fields. Scholars have referred to them as symbolic reform entrepreneurs, institutional entrepreneurs, idea carriers or fashion-setters who lead the way in showing which ideas and practices are most progressive and desirable. In the present study, this group includes authors of policy documents, developers of handbooks or training courses on civil society involvement, process facilitators and enthusiasts reform adopters within organisations, who work to spread awareness about civil society involvement practices among their colleagues and networks.

In chapters six and seven, I draw on this categorisation of institutional pressures to highlight how different steering and dissemination activities are seen to have driven the studied reform’s journey through the Swedish public sector.

Organisational responses to institutional pressures

This final section of the analytical framework introduces concepts and theories pertaining to how organisational responses to institutional pressures can be understood and predicted. The section begins with a note on the importance of paying attention to the role of ‘interpretation’ and ‘translation’ in studies of organisations’ responses to institutional pressures.

Interpretation in focus

Interpretation plays a central role in this thesis. It is both the subject of analysis – my focus being how affected actors have made sense of the studied reform – and the means by which analysis is carried out, as will be explored in the next chapter. In this section, I address the acts of interpretations that take place when individuals in organisations are faced with institutional pressures to change. Whilst I have chosen to use the broader term ‘interpretation’ here, I draw also on constructivist institutionalist theories expounding the related concepts of ‘translation’ and ‘editing’.

Whereas much constructivist institutionalist research has focused on how the diffusion of ideas makes organisations more similar or on what makes certain

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247 Christensen & Laegreid 2003, p.6.
ideas become popular and spread, one group of scholars have argued that such studies overlook the dimension of organisational behaviour that pertains to how ideas are interpreted, amended and potentially rejected in different settings. In Scandinavia in particular, research on how ideas and practices are translated and edited to fit with the values and habits of the settings into which they are adopted has become an established subfield in the organisational analysis literature. Organisational analysts Barbara Czarniawska and Bernward Joerges explain the reasoning behind this perspective by suggesting that the content of an idea and how well it fits a certain issue or context may actually be of negligible relevance. “With some exaggeration,” they write, “most ideas can be proven to fit most problems, assuming good will, creativity and a tendency to consensus. It is therefore the process of translation that should become our concern, not the property of ideas.”

Ideas travel between organisations in two directions: from the macro to the micro level, in the form of generalised ideas becoming adapted into local practice, and from the micro to the macro level, in the form of successful local practices becoming picked up, generalised and spread to other contexts. Translation and editing occurs in both directions, meaning that the new local practice will always differ in some sense from what the inventors of the original idea envisioned. The way an idea is framed and packaged can also put constraints on how it is adopted, directing target audiences to interpret and shape it to suit a particular agenda. Organisational analysts Ann Westenholz and colleagues have argued that in order to properly understand the construction and appeal of new organisational practices, researchers must pay attention to both the diffusion and the adoption and translation of ideas: to the local and the global simultaneously.

In the context of this study, this observation highlights how my research questions are necessarily entangled. Investigating how the reform ideas have been received in one setting without also seeking to understand by what means they have dispersed and how they have been framed and packaged before arriving there, would leave the picture incomplete. Hence, while the analytical questions and concepts included in this framework may appear to be presented in chronological order, with the framing of the reform as a starting point, followed by its dissemination through institutional pressures and its reception in organisations in this final section, this is primarily a matter of presentation. In reality, the relationship between these different dimensions of organisational change is likely more cyclical in nature, with the reform being both the source and the product of institutional pressures and the individual organisations’ interpretations and implementations of it producing new pressures in turn.

The concept of interpretation thus remains central throughout this thesis: in chapter five, where I explore the meaning of the reform ideas as presented in

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256 Røvik 2008, ch.11-13; Westenholz et al. 2006.
texts and interpreted by interview respondents; in chapter six, which explores different dissemination mechanisms and their relative impacts as seen by interviewees; and in chapter seven, which presents respondents’ observations of the reform ideas’ translation into practice.

Types and predictors of organisational responses

Some institutionalist scholars concerned with organisational change have sought to make visible and predict the different categories of responses available to organisations faced with institutional pressures.258 To these discussions, Christine Oliver has offered a typology of organisational responses that are differentiated by the degree of active agency displayed by the responding organisation, from passive conformity to active resistance.259 The first response she lists is ‘acquiescence’, which refers to when an organisation conforms to institutional pressures. Acquiescence may take different forms: it may be expressed as an organisation’s habitual observance of unspoken, for-granted-taken norms; as its conscious or unconscious imitation of other organisations’ working models;260 or as a strategic decision to comply with institutional requirements. Thus these variations, too, differ in the degree of agency involved, with compliance being the most conscious and strategic of the three.261

The next response in Oliver’s typology is ‘compromise’, referring to the partial compliance that results from organisations attempting to balance or negotiate between different, conflicting pressures and interests. This strategy thus implies that the organisation takes some active measure to protect its own interests, whilst also complying with external pressures.262

The third possible response is ‘avoidance’. In Oliver’s typology, this denotes organisations “concealing their nonconformity, buffering themselves from institutional pressures, or escaping from institutional norms or expectations”.263 That is, it refers to the measures that organisations employ to avoid having to pay the price of non-conformity. An example of this is when organisations adopt the rhetoric of a policy reform without the intention of actually implementing it – a strategy described in the literature variously as ‘window-dressing’, ‘ceremonial conformity’, or the "symbolic acceptance of institutional norms".264 Another avoidance tactic is when organisations intentionally keep their practical activities out of view from external observers and auditors; in effect hiding their noncompliance to avoid sanctions.

‘Defiance’, next, refers to when organisations take a more active stance against an institutional demand by openly dismissing, challenging or attacking

259 Oliver 1991, p.151.
262 Oliver 1991, p.153-154
Such responses are more likely, Oliver suggests, when the perceived costs of nonconformity are low or “when organisations believe they can demonstrate the rationality or righteousness of their own alternative convictions and conduct”. 266

Finally, Oliver mentions that organisations may seek to ‘manipulate’ institutional pressures. This most active display of strategic agency can take the form of organisations co-opting the institutional pressures they are subjected to or influencing or controlling their source, content or the channels through which they are disseminated. 267

Whilst this study makes no attempt to map how public sector organisations have responded to the studied reform attempts, it does examine how affected actors from both the public sector and civil society have interpreted the way the reform ideas have been implemented in their respective settings. In this analysis, Oliver’s typology of responses provides a helpful framework for making sense of the interview respondents’ observations. So, too, do the theories that she and others have developed as means of predicting organisations’ responses to institutional pressures. 268 These theories, whilst emphasising slightly different factors, tend to agree that organisational responses to institutional pressures are a function of the interplay between the content and nature of these pressures 269, and the internal culture and dynamics of the target organisation. 270

Taking Oliver’s predictive model as a starting point, three internal factors can be identified as particularly relevant for predicting an organisation’s response to institutional pressures. These are (1) awareness among the organisation’s members of the demand and recognition of its value – what Pache and Santos refer to as the ‘internal representation’ of the institutional demand; 271 (2) the degree of conflict between the institutional pressure and other interests – whether these are established internal values or interests, or conflicting external pressures; 272 and (3) the organisation’s capacity to conform, in the sense of having the resources, autonomy and mandate to do so. 273 Importantly, however, the emphasis on convergence and conflict between new and established values and interests should not be overplayed. As Pache and Santos point out, individuals in organisations will not only display strong enthusiasm or resistance to institutional demands, but may also be indifferent to them, “or comply …
without necessarily holding on to all of [their] core tenets”. 274 These are observations that will prove pertinent in later chapters of this thesis.

These scholars have further suggested that in highly fragmented organisational fields, the numbers of conflicting normative pressures facing organisations will be higher, which is likely to affect their ability to conform to external pressures. 275 It is my expectation that the cross-sector, multi-level setting in which this study is situated constitutes an example of how governance reforms bring new levels of field fragmentation to public decision making; a theme discussed in chapter eight.

A spectrum of possible outcomes

Hence, when a new idea or practice becomes known to an organisation, a number of responses are possible. It may be avoided or defied; 276 the leadership or affected professionals may decide that they have no interest in adopting the promoted changes, opting instead to continue as before or opt for a different reform route. Alternatively, the idea or practice may prove persuasive enough, whether on the strength of its content and framing or the force of the institutional pressures through which it is promoted, to become endorsed by actors with enough influence to set an implementation process in motion. Their response in such instances may be categorised as acquiescence to the reform or, more likely, a compromise – whereby the new idea or practice is edited to fit the established culture of the recipient organisation. 277

Potentially, in time, this strategy leads to some version of the new idea or practice becoming integrated in the organisations’ operations. It may also lead to only certain elements of the idea becoming adopted and others rejected. The concepts of ‘institutionalisation’ and ‘decoupling’ address different possible outcomes of these processes.

Institutionalisation

‘Institutionalisation’, first, denotes the process by which an idea or practice becomes embedded in an organisation’s day-to-day values and working practices. Such processes are typically slow-moving, occurring gradually and subtly as organisations change their rhetoric and standards, and their members adjust their working habits. 278

A fully institutionalised idea or practice is one that forms a stable and for-granted-taken element of the organisation’s activities; one on which there is broad consensus about its value and functionality. 279 Organisational analysts Arjen Boin and Tom Christensen have proposed three criteria that need to be fulfilled for a new idea or practice to achieve this status. First, employees must

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274 Pache & Santos 2013a, p.6.
276 Oliver 1991.
277 Ibid.
278 Powell & Rerup 2017.
279 Boin & Christensen 2008, p.278
trust that it works as claimed. The promoted idea or practice must appear functional and those promoting it must appear trustworthy. Second, it must fit with the organisation’s culture and core values. Third, it must not upset the power constellations of the organisation.\textsuperscript{280} Boin and Christensen suggest that failure on either of these criteria means that the new idea or practice is unlikely to ‘stick’ within the organisation or that it will be short-lived.

However, an idea or practice appearing to be embedded in an organisation does not necessarily mean that interpretations of its meaning or value are universally shared. Equally, ideas or practices that are widely considered legitimate may become controversial and challenged over time, in response to changes in circumstances or new pressures emerging within the organisation or its surrounding environment.\textsuperscript{281} Conversely, ideas or practices that are widely questioned, criticised or subjected to conflicting interpretations may still exert significant influence over an organisation’s language and practices.\textsuperscript{282} For these reasons and in the context of this study, full institutionalisation should not be viewed as the ideal end-point in the implementation of the attempted reform. Instead, the concept of institutionalisation is better used as a way of depicting the spectrum of possible outcomes and the inevitable variability of the reform’s fate in different organisations and over time.\textsuperscript{283}

**Decoupling**

Once endorsed, the adoption of a new idea or practice into an organisation tends to involve several stages of translation and editing, whereby it is adjusted to fit the values, traditions and needs both of the organisation at large and the individual departments, units and individuals within it. As implementation proceeds, the idea or practice typically begins to be visible in the organisation’s language and rhetoric, appearing in policy documents, reports and plans. At times, however, its impact does not reach beyond this stage. That is, the attempted reform is not translated into meaningful practical changes, or the new practices fail to deliver the promised outcomes. Scholars in the constructivist institutionalist tradition have conceptualised these gaps between what organisations seek to do (or claim to be doing) and their actual activities, as ‘decoupling’.\textsuperscript{284}

Decoupling may occur in different ways. One is when a reform never reaches beyond the rhetorical level, as a result of ineffectual implementation or because it simply does not work as intended in that particular context.\textsuperscript{285} As noted, the qualities that make ideas appealing to a broad audience do not necessarily

\textsuperscript{280} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{281} Boin & Christensen 2008; Oliver 1992.

\textsuperscript{282} Tomson 2008, p.27, 44.

\textsuperscript{283} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{284} Meyer & Rowan 1977, p.356-7.

\textsuperscript{285} Meyer & Rowan 1977.
translate into workable practice.\textsuperscript{286} This means that an idea or a practice that appears to be widely endorsed may still fail to leave any discernible mark on how the organisation conducts its work. Another example of decoupling is when the adoption of an idea is purely rhetorical from the outset. That is, when an organisation claims to endorse a reform but no substantive changes take place. Instead, the organisation may adopt the language of the reform, for instance by applying a new label to an old practice.\textsuperscript{287} Such instances of ‘window-dressing’ or ‘ceremonial’ conformity are examples of the strategy of avoidance in Oliver’s typology of organisational responses to institutional pressures, described above.\textsuperscript{288}

Importantly, however, the emphasis on myth and ceremonial conformity in the institutionalist literature should not be understood to mean that reforms displaying these characteristics have no impact beyond the rhetorical level. On the contrary, empirical studies have repeatedly linked the ‘ceremonial’ adoption of ideas to actual organisational changes, both at the structural level and in organisations’ day-to-day activities.\textsuperscript{289} It has been suggested that these observations undermine the value of the sociological institutionalists’ theories of ‘decoupling’.\textsuperscript{290} However, I will suggest in later chapters that making such gaps between rhetoric and practice visible remains a vital task for scholars of organisational change, not least because doing so enables questions to be asked about why these gaps emerge and how they can be avoided; questions that should be of interest to scholars and practitioners alike.

Again, however, these discussions emphasise how implementation and institutionalisation, rather than being end points in a reform, are best understood as constantly evolving processes. Attempted reforms move along a spectrum of potential outcomes that range from rejection through different stages of implementation; at times displaying signs of institutionalisation, at other times, of decoupling.\textsuperscript{291}

2.4 Applying the theoretical perspectives

In forthcoming chapters, the theoretical concepts and perspectives presented here are used to help conceptualise and understand affected actors’ accounts of the value and fallout of the studied reform of civil society involvement practices. As noted, these policy developments have potentially wide-reaching implications for Swedish democratic decision-making. This makes it imperative

\textsuperscript{286} Meyer 1996, p.251-2.
\textsuperscript{287} Christensen & Laegreid 2003: 6-8; Tomson 2008: 41.
\textsuperscript{288} Oliver 1991, p.154.
\textsuperscript{290} In acknowledgement of this, Ravik likens organisational change processes to the way a virus infects recipient bodies, to then enter an incubation period after which they may mutate, generate symptoms, become dormant or recede. Ravik 2008, ch 15.
to ask questions about what motivating forces have driven the reform agenda and how affected actors have experienced its consequences.

There is a hierarchy between the two bodies of literature introduced in this chapter. The governance research literature serves as a wider scholarly context to which I intend to contribute new insights about how governance reforms have been interpreted and rationalised at the micro-level, in the public sector and among civil society stakeholders in Sweden. Discussions about my findings on this subject can be found in chapters five and eight.

The constructivist institutionalist literature provides the primary source of analytical perspectives and tools with which I address the study’s theoretical research problem and answer its research questions. This part of the thesis begins in chapter five, where I examine how the reform ideas have been framed in official government texts and civil society consultation responses, and how affected actors have interpreted their meaning and value. Here, I make use of the first two parts of the framework, pertaining to the meaning of ‘reform’ and the different ways of framing organisational ideas and practices. In chapter six, I draw on theories of formal and informal institutional pressures in an analysis of how affected actors have interpreted the reform ideas’ dispersion between settings. Chapter seven presents and analyses respondents’ perceptions of the reform’s implementation and impacts, making use of the theories of institutionalisation and decoupling outlined above.

My focus throughout is on how these processes have been interpreted and responded to at the micro-level, by individuals in organisations affected by the reform ideas. As such, my intended contribution to the constructivist institutionalist literature is primarily directed at scholars concerned with the micro-foundations of organisational behaviour. In this category I include North American sociological institutionalist and others who have called for a bridging of the macro-micro divide in organisational analysis292, alongside the Scandinavian scholars who have already made progress in the micro-level study of organisational change processes.293

Again, my analysis of these developments is not rooted in an assumption that the reform has been driven by a particular logic of reasoning. Instead, I aim to make visible how different logics – outcome-oriented and norm-driven – have combined to guide affected actors’ responses to the reform ideas. A discussion about these dimensions and their implications for further research can be found in chapter eight.

293 For examples see e.g. Boxenbaum 2006; Christensen, Fimreite & Lægreid 2007, ‘Reform of the employment and welfare administrations - The challenges of co-coordinating diverse public organizations’, International Review of Administrative Sciences; Røvik 2008; Tomson 2008. For a discussion about this branch of the literature, see e.g. Czarniawska 2008; Johansson 2002; Westenholz et al. 2006.
3. Methods: an interpretive approach to policy analysis

This chapter presents the methodological considerations that have shaped this study’s research design and explains how they complement the theoretical perspectives presented in the previous chapter. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first presents some key characteristics and vulnerabilities of the interpretive approach to policy analysis and reiterates why I believe it to be a good fit with my research aims. Next, I present my empirical focus and the two levels of study at which the research has been carried out. The third section describes the collection and analysis of data.

3.1 Introducing interpretive policy analysis

The methods applied in this research draw primarily on the writings of interpretive policy analysts, with Dvora Yanow294 and Hendrik Wagenaar295 having served as particularly valuable sources of reading and inspiration. Over the following pages, I present the elements of this literature on which I have built the research design for this study.

Interpretive research can be understood as the attempt to build an understanding of a social phenomenon from the ground up, starting with the interpretations and experiences of situated actors.296 The philosophical foundations of this approach can be sourced to phenomenology, the study of social phenomena from the perspective of individual actors’ (often unspoken, sometimes mundane) perceptions and understandings of them.297 Importantly, the meanings that interpretive policy analysts search for are seen not only as post-facto interpretations of social phenomena, but as constitutive of them. It is assumed that the way people interpret their surroundings shapes their behaviour and, by extension, their environment.298 As such, the ontological roots of the interpretive research approach I employ are social constructivist.

294 Yanow 2000, among other publications.
295 Wagenaar 2011.
296 Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012, s.5-6.
298 Hay 2011; Wagenaar 2011.
Applying this approach to a study of public sector reform implies an expectation that the individuals and organisations included in the analysis are not expected to be static. Rather, the organisations affected by the studied reform are likely to at any one time harbour multiple and conflicting values and practices, which will affect their members’ interpretations of the reform ideas.299 Their interpretations are further a function of their own backgrounds and dispositions, and will be subjected to ongoing challenges and re-evaluations as their perceptions and circumstances change. The task of an interpretive policy analyst studying such a setting is to unveil the divergent interpretations of the developments at hand, with the aim to understand how the different values and understandings affect the way policies are shaped and implemented.300 As succinctly put by Wagenaar: “To understand why policies fail or succeed or are resisted, one must seek to understand what it means to those affected by it.”301

This, then, is what an interpretive analysis provides. It does not offer to establish objective facts about a studied event, nor does it make claims about its findings being generalisable. Instead, its aim is to make visible how a social phenomenon is understood by some of those affected by it. These insights are sought in the belief that they can help build a fuller and more nuanced understanding of how social phenomena play out and why.

I consider Dvora Yanow’s conception of a ‘meaning audit’ a helpful way of approaching this task. Yanow suggests that a meaning audit begins with the investigator asking the seemingly straightforward questions: “What does this proposed policy mean, and for whom does it have meaning?”302 Yet the questions are not, of course, as clear-cut as they might appear. The anticipation is that they will uncover a multitude of answers, revealing the diversity of respondents’ contexts, experiences and values, and thereby the spectrum of possible interpretations that reside within a single policy proposal.303 Yanow further suggests broadening the scope of inquiry to include questions about “how a policy accrues meaning; where meanings reside; how they are transmitted to and among various policy stakeholders; how they come to be shared or not shared; how they may be destroyed.”304

Another of Yanow’s concepts that has proved useful in this study is ‘interpretive communities’ (also ‘communities of meaning’ or ‘communities of practice’).305 These are groupings of actors, or, as I have chosen to apply them, categories of interpretations, differentiated by their contrasting understandings of and attitudes to the policy under analysis.306 Yanow suggests that identifying interpretive communities in a material helps researchers distinguish between the different ways a policy is framed and understood. This enables them to analyse

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299 Powell & Rerup 2017; Yanow 2987.
300 Hacer & Wagenaar 2003; Yanow 1987
301 Wagenaar 2011, p.3.
302 Yanow 2003, p.235.
303 Yanow 2003.
304 Yanow 1993, p.41.
the values that underlie each interpretation, and, in the next step, the effects of these values and interpretations on the policy’s implementation.307

Characteristics of interpretive policy analysis

Whilst interpretive analysis can be characterised more as a broad approach than a specific set of methods,308 there are some common features to how it has been applied. One is an emphasis on local knowledge. The starting point for analysis is the experiences, perceptions and interpretations of the actors affected by a particular policy event. Accessing this knowledge is typically achieved through interviews, ethnographic observation and analysis of relevant policy documentation.309

The fit between the interpretivist’s ambitions to unveil situated knowledge and ethnographic research methods is often stressed, with some scholars suggesting that interpretive policy analysis requires an ethnographic approach to fulfil its potential.310 On this point, however, I side with Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes among others,311 who have argued that interpretive analysis ought not to be equated with any specific methods of data collection. Bevir and Rhodes contend that an interpretive approach “does not prescribe a particular way of creating data, but rather a particular way of treating data of any type … as evidence of the meanings or beliefs embedded in actions.”312 This is how I have chosen to apply the interpretive approach in this study, where I analyse texts and interviews but make no use of ethnographic methods.313

Another characteristic often found in interpretive policy analysis is the search for symbolic language and acts in policy texts and in public servants’ responses to them. Helen Sullivan writes that symbols are used by policy makers to “dictate meaning and evoke particular responses from stakeholders”314. A characteristic of symbols is that they accommodate multiple meanings, implying that, in the words of Yanow, two implementors of the same policy “may each be implementing something different”.315 From this follows that the more people affected by a policy proposal, the more interpretations are possible.316 Identifying the symbolic meaning of key policy terms can thus help the analyst unveil both dominant and divergent interpretations of the policy under analysis.317 As noted in chapter two, interpretive policy analysts’ interest in

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310 Hay 2011.
312 Bevir & Rhodes 2010, ch. 4, p.67 (my italics).
313 Ethnographic observation was ruled out early in this study as it was not clear how observations of any isolated involvement processes would benefit the study’s aim to describe and understand the motivations behind and perceived impacts of recent attempts to reform civil society’s involvement in policy making in the fields of health and social care in Sweden.
314 Sullivan 2007, p.146.
315 Yanow 1987, p.110.
316 Yanow 1987, p.110.
policies and symbols mirrors the concern that constructivist institutionalist scholars have shown for how ‘rationalised myths’ are used to persuade people in organisations of the value of new ideas and practices.

Yet another common feature in interpretive policy analysis is the use of a flexible and abductive logic of inquiry. This refers to how the researcher, often starting from an empirical puzzle or a disparity between an empirical observation and existing theory, throughout the research process moves back and forth between their gathered data and the theoretical literature, letting each be informed by the other. Yanow notes that this means that the data generation and analysis phases cannot be seen as separate from each other. Rather, the “design of the research project, [the] fieldwork, deskwork and textwork (the ‘writing up’) are intertwined”.

On a related note, Haverland and Yanow posit that the aim of interpretive policy analysts is not to operationalise predetermined concepts, but to unveil the “everyday theories” and concepts used by the individuals affected by the events studied. Hence interpretive scholars do not shape their inquiry around preexisting theoretical concepts as much as let these derive from the data and analysis. Where existing theories and concepts are used, they serve instead to “sensitise” the scholar to their emerging findings, providing possible interpretations and lines of inquiry that they may use to further their analysis, and to which they may add their own findings and adjustments.

Such an approach necessitates a flexible research design and for the researcher to be open to adjusting their questions and theories during the course of the research, if required by the emerging findings. In the words of Wagenaar, interpretive policy analysts should set themselves up for novelty, designing their research projects so that they “create the conditions for surprise.” A sometime consequence of this tactic is that the problem and questions addressed in interpretive studies do not become fixed until the later stages of the research process.

As hinted in the previous chapter, the term ‘interpretation’ in interpretive analysis refers both to the object of analysis – situated actors’ interpretations of the social phenomenon being studied – and to the acts of interpretation carried out by the analyst themselves. This means that the researcher’s own interpretations and preconceptions will inevitably affect the data collected, as their questions and responses steer and delimit the information offered by interviewees. Methodologists have pointed out that for these reasons, an

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320 Yanow 2007, p.411
322 Haverland & Yanow 2012.
326 Wagenaar 2011, ch. 9; Yanow 2014.
327 Hay 2011, p.168.
328 Haverland & Yanow 2012, p.404; Wagenaar 2011, p.8; Yanow 2007, p.408.
interpretive approach requires that the researcher is mindful of how their own background, preconceptions, values and limitations affect the research design, their interactions with study subjects, the gathered data and their analysis. In other words, users of such approaches need to display a significant degree of *reflexivity and transparency* with regards to their own role in shaping the study’s results.³²⁹ On this note, Haverland and Yanow write that an interpretive analyst’s “truth claims … rest on the trustworthiness of their interpretations, and this rests on the systematicity of data generation and what might be called the ‘attitude of doubt’ – of ongoing probing and self-questioning – with which it is carried out”³³⁰.

The decision to adopt an interpretive approach in this study has been informed both by my personal interest in the experiences of actors affected by the studied reform and by my belief that such an approach is a good fit with the chosen theoretical perspectives. I argue that an interpretive, micro-level analysis can provide valuable insights about how attempts to reform civil society involvement practices have been understood, motivated and implemented in Sweden. It is my belief that such insights can be of relevance both to the governance research literature and to the organisational analysis literature – both of which have tended to overlook the perspectives and influences of individual agents in the past.³³¹

**Criticisms of the interpretive approach**

Like all research approaches, interpretive policy analysis has drawbacks and vulnerabilities. That its core purpose is to analyse not objective facts about events but individual actors’ interpretations of them, leaves it vulnerable to questions about the reliability and replicability of any findings generated this way. Critics from a positivist tradition might object that the interpretive approach gives too much clout to the whims and subjective notions of individual actors, both in the role of research subjects and as analysts. However, whereas positivist research studies are designed with the explicit aim of restricting the influence of subjectivity on their results, the interpretive scholar makes subjectivity – in the form of situated actors’ interpretations – their object of analysis. Accepting their own subjective influences over the research as inevitable, they seek not to obliterate it but to minimise its impacts through acknowledgement and reflection.

The interpretive analyst’s preference for flexible research designs that are open to continuous review might also prompt questions about the validity of their results. If the questions and theoretical perspectives have been adapted along the way, how can the analyst’s conclusions be trusted? How, for instance, do we know that respondents’ answers have not been skewed to fit a line of questioning introduced in the later stages of analysis? Proponents of the

³³⁰ Haverland & Yanow 2012, p.404.
interpretive approach have retorted that such criticisms display a lack of understanding for the interpretivist’s way of seeing the world and the claims they make about their research.\textsuperscript{332} On the topic of validity, Schwartz-Shea and Yanow write that the interpretivists’ focus on understanding (but not measuring) ‘local knowledge’ and ‘meaning-making’ puts them “at odds with [the validity] criterion’s concerns … [for] the adequacy of measures”.\textsuperscript{333} They go on to note that:

interpretive understandings of social phenomena as being dynamic and fluid, as well as historically constituted, are inconsistent with both concept reliability measures and requirements for replicability, resting as these do on a more stable, ahistorical understanding of the world.”\textsuperscript{334}

In this study, the early rounds of interviews, which were conducted as part of a different, prior research project,\textsuperscript{335} served both as a data source and as a source of insight that guided the new research design and the questions asked in later rounds of interviews. Care was taken to avoid analysis of the early interviews being skewed by lines of inquiry developed later in the research process.\textsuperscript{336}

3.2 Empirical focus

In line with the interpretive tradition, the choice of empirical focus for this study has not been guided by a predetermined theoretical problem, but has been informed by a combination of empirical, theoretical and practical considerations.\textsuperscript{337}

The present study is an examination of what I interpret as an attempt to reform civil society’s opportunities to contribute to public decision making in health and social care policy in Sweden. As noted in the introductory chapter, these policy developments have been characterised by a lack of clarity pertaining to why they were carried out, what practical changes they sought and what impacts they might have had.

My personal interest in these events sprung from empirical observations made in my work as a researcher at Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College\textsuperscript{338} and as a consultant working on stakeholder engagement projects in Sweden and the UK. In the latter position, I experienced the fluctuating trends in involvement practices first-hand. I often wondered at the readiness with which public bodies embraced the latest participation methods, sometimes without properly considering whether these met the needs of decision makers and

\textsuperscript{332} Haverland & Yanow 2012; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012, p.92-95.
\textsuperscript{333} Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012, p.94.
\textsuperscript{334} Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012, p.94-95.
\textsuperscript{335} See the section Two levels of study below.
\textsuperscript{336} For a further discussion on this topic, see Benefits and risks of conducting secondary analysis at the end of this chapter.
\textsuperscript{337} Haverland & Yanow 2012; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012, p.69-71.
\textsuperscript{338} Gavelin 2010, 2011.
stakeholders. At Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College, I conducted a follow-up study of the Agreement between the Swedish Government, national idea-based organisations in the social sphere and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Överenskommelsen mellan Regeringen, idéburna organisationer inom det sociala området och Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting).

In undertaking this research, I was struck by how respondents from civil society and different parts of the public sector had very different views on what constituted good involvement practice. As a result, their reasons for endorsing or rejecting the promoted reform differed widely. Whilst some of those interviewed were spurred by a desire to redress the disadvantages that certain organisations experienced in their interactions with the public sector, others were oblivious that such problems existed. Some enthusiastically propagandised for the use of deliberative involvement approaches, but appeared unclear on how traditional methods were failing or how the promoted approaches would constitute an improvement. Others were vocally opposed to what they perceived as the poorly thought-through promotion of new forms of representation and influence.

It became clear that beneath the ostensibly benevolent attempts by the Swedish Government and some of their civil society stakeholders to review and reform involvement practices, lay not only different practical aspirations but also conflicting ideas about what democratic decision making should look like, what role civil society should play in it and how this role should be managed. For me, glimpsing these underlying tensions evoked an interest in understanding what drives public organisations to change their ways of working and what happens when clashes emerge between old and new values and practices. With an empirical focus and the outlines of a research problem thus identified, I found the governance literature and the constructivist institutionalist literatures to be particularly fruitful sources of insights and further lines of inquiry.

Two ways of ‘casing’ the study

Whilst this is a study of a social phenomenon (a public reform) taking place in a confined setting (public policy on health and social care in Sweden), I have not described it as a ‘case study’. This is not because the label would be inaccurate, but because my study does not conform to the most common usage of the term and describing it as such might therefore risk confusing readers about my intentions and approach.

In positivist research, a case study is typically understood as “an intensive study of a single unit with an aim to generalise across a larger set of units.”

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339 “The social sphere” is the official translation of “det sociala området” which in the Agreement is defined as the following policy areas: health care, medical care, social care, financial support for the sick and disabled and financial support for families and children.
340 The study was funded by the Swedish Government via the Agreement secretariat and was carried out by myself and Marie Nordfeldt at Ersta Sköndal University College. See Gavelin 2010, 2011; Nordfeldt 2012.
341 Gavelin 2010.
The boundaries of the case, and the precise criteria used to select it, are defined at the outset of the research process to provide the best possible conditions for solving a particular research problem and to generate generalisable findings in the process.\textsuperscript{343} By contrast, and as emphasised by Wagenaar among others, an interpretive analyst might begin a research process not entirely sure what their study is a case of. They might, however, have a good hunch about it and a strong sense of curiosity driving them to investigate further.\textsuperscript{344} This resonates with how this study was conceived: by empirical observations raising questions that led me to explore different theoretical literatures and, over time, to the articulation of a research problem and analytical framework rooted in my chosen bodies of literature.

In interpretive analysis, then, a ‘case’ is more loosely understood as the ‘site’ or ‘setting’ in which the research is conducted, chosen on the basis that it offers an illustrative, revealing or particularly puzzling example of a social phenomenon.\textsuperscript{345} To avoid confusing this with a positivistic understanding of case study research, Haverland & Yanow have proposed that interpretive analysts instead use Charles S. Ragin’s concept of ‘casing’ to describe the processes by which they identify and motivate their chosen empirical focus.\textsuperscript{346} Ragin defines ‘cases’ less as empirical units of analysis than as products of the routine research operation whereby researchers define what it is they are studying.\textsuperscript{347} As such, he shifts focus from the noun ‘case’ to the verb ‘casing’, arguing that doing so makes visible that a ‘case’ may take many forms and that the way a study is ‘cased’ is dynamic: it can change in response to emerging findings or the researcher trying out new theoretical perspectives.

I find this latter acknowledgement a particularly compelling aspect of Ragin’s proposal, as it takes into account how a researcher might see their objects of study as examples of several different social phenomena worthy of study. Moreover, their perceptions of which of these is more or less important might change in response to insights gained at different stages of the research process.\textsuperscript{348}

Following Ragin’s approach, I present two alternative ways of ‘casing’ the present study below. As emphasised in previous chapters, there is a hierarchy between the two. With my theoretical framework building primarily on constructivist institutionalism in organisational analysis, the ‘casing’ that pertains to this literature takes precedence in this study.

Firstly, then, this research project originates in an interest in the mechanisms that drive public organisations to change their ways of thinking, talking and working. As noted, I share my concern for such questions with the constructivist institutionalist branches of organisational analysis. One way of ‘casing’ the study is thus as an example of the emergence, dissemination and implementation of a public sector reform, to which questions about organisational motivations

\textsuperscript{343} Haverland & Yanow 2012, p.405-406; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012, p.70-71.
\textsuperscript{344} Haverland & Yanow 2012, p.406; Wagenaar 2011, p.244-247.
\textsuperscript{345} Haverland & Yanow 2012, p.406.
\textsuperscript{346} Ibid., p.406.
\textsuperscript{347} Haverland & Yanow 2012, p.406.
\textsuperscript{348} Ibid., p.221-224.
and behaviour can be asked. As argued previously, I believe that an interpretive approach offers a valuable bottom-up, micro-level perspective on organisational behaviour, making this an appropriate approach for conducting such a study. The fact that the studied reform was initially adopted and advocated at national government level with input from civil society organisations, and that it has subsequently been shaped and dispersed at different levels of government, as a joint effort between public bodies and civil society organisations – i.e. in a network setting – adds further levels of complexity and scope for new insights. For instance, this setting offers the opportunity to explore how increased ‘field fragmentation’ generated by governance reforms affects how public reforms are framed, interpreted and received by target organisations.349

Secondly, another way of ‘casing’ the studied reform is as an example of the spread of governance: defined here as an international reform movement promoting horizontal, decentralised and network-based approaches to public decision making. The Swedish context, with its neocorporatist history and long tradition of civil society involvement in policy making, means that it is not clear to what extent the ideas and practices referred to as governance can really be said to constitute new phenomena.350 This arguably makes it a useful setting for investigating the impacts of governance ideas beyond the Anglo-Saxon countries where much previous governance research has been situated. As argued in chapter one, interpretive approaches are particularly well suited to the study of governance, as they provide micro-level insights about how these trends have been understood and motivated in different settings.351

Two levels of study

The research presented in this thesis has been conducted at two levels of government. The main focal point has been attempts to reform civil society involvement in national government policy on health and social care.352 I consider these policy fields a pertinent setting for several reasons.

Firstly, health and social care policy was the focus of the first Agreement created between the Swedish government, civil society organisations and the Swedish Associations of Local Authorities. As such, it was the first national policy area where the ‘Dialogue’ principle was formally introduced before it was rolled out to other policy fields and settings.

Secondly, there exists a long tradition of collaboration and knowledge-exchange between the public sector and civil society organisations in these particular policy fields. In parts of this sector, there are legal requirements that public bodies should collaborate with civil society organisations, something that

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349 Pache & Santos 2010.
352 The specific policy areas in focus are those defined in the Agreement as “the social sphere” (det sociala området): health care, medical care, social care, financial support for the sick and disabled and financial support for families and children.
further sets it apart from many other policy areas. This makes these policy areas a particularly relevant setting for realising my ambition to study how the meeting of old and new involvement practices has been handled.

Thirdly, health and social care also forms the largest expenditure area in the Swedish governmental budget, making it strategically important for politicians, citizens and other stakeholders. The attempted reform took shape at a time when the Swedish welfare state and its relations to civil society was undergoing a period of change – developments that were intensely debated in politics, the media and wider society at the time.

The national-level part of the research is a continuation of a previous study that examined the creation and early implementation of the Agreement. The original project was funded by the Agreement secretariat and took place in two stages between 2009 and 2011. It included a retrospective examination of the ‘dialogue’ process through which the Agreement was created and its first year of implementation, as well as a follow-up study of affected actors’ perceptions of its impacts, carried out two years later. It differed from this study in that it examined the early implementation of all of the Agreement’s principles. By contrast, this research project focuses solely on the ambitions to review and reform civil society’s involvement in public decision making, as articulated under the principles of ‘Dialogue’ and ‘Transparency’ in the Agreement and the 2009 Civil Society Bill.

Interview data and documentation from the first follow-up study are reused in this dissertation, alongside data gathered in another round of interviews in 2016-17. This has given the national-level part of the study a longitudinal dimension – albeit limited in scope – which has enabled me to observe some changes in interpretations of the reform ideas over a period of several years.

In addition to the research conducted at the national level, I have carried out a smaller sub-study examining the adoption and early implementation of the ‘Dialogue’ principle in Uppsala Local Authority’s agreement with local associations. As outlined in chapter one, incorporating two levels of government in the research is done because in Sweden, a significant proportion of public services are provided at the local and regional level. This is also where the vast majority of civil society organisations are active. Consequently, it is at the local and regional levels that much of the contacts between civil society organisations and decision makers take place. This fact drove some observers of the first

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353 E.g. the Social Services Act (Socialtjänstlagen, Sol) which states that local social services (socialnämnder) are obliged to collaborate with civil society organisations in its planning and outreach work. SFS 2001:453 Socialtjänstlag.
355 Andersson, Erlandsson & Sundström 2017; Hartman 2011. See chapter four for more details on these developments.
357 Gavelin 2010.
358 Nordfeldt 2012. In addition, two smaller case studies of local-level agreements in Örebro and Botkyrka local authorities were carried out in 2010, see Gavelin 2011, Samverkan och påverkan. En studie av överenskommelser mellan två kommuner och idébarna organisationer.
359 For a reflection on the pitfalls of reusing old interview data, see Benefits and risks of conducting secondary analysis at the end of this chapter.
360 Out of 52 interviewees at the national level, 11 were interviewed more than once.
361 Lidström 2016.
process to comment that it was at the local and regional level that efforts to improve relations between the sectors were most acutely needed. They suggested that it was therefore local rather than national agreements that had the potential to make a difference and that should be the focus of researchers’ attentions. With this in mind, representatives from the local authority and local civil society are included in this study to provide insights about how the reform has been interpreted and implemented at the local level.

Uppsala Local Authority was selected after I contacted the 10 local authorities that had started an ‘agreement’ process at the time when this part of the study was due to commence, in autumn 2013. The 10 authorities were subjected to a selection process conducted through telephone interviews, in which Uppsala met the highest number of selection criteria. The criteria were that: (1) Some type of rhetorical and practical changes pertaining to civil society involvement should have occurred or been attempted within the local authority in recent years; (2) Some official statement of intent to prioritise civil society involvement should have been made, e.g. through the creation of a local agreement; (3) A stated ambition to develop civil society involvement methods should be in place or about to be created, e.g. new action plans or handbooks; (4) Local civil society organisations should be actively seeking to influence their relationship with the local authority in some way, e.g. through participation in an agreement process, through the creation of local umbrella organisations, or similar.

It should be noted that the Uppsala agreement between the local authority and civil society organisations was not limited to health and social care policy, but incorporated all budget areas. Some of the civil society organisations interviewed in this part of the study had a broader remit, such as youth activities or recreation, although they all had some dealings with social exclusion or similar issues that fall under the health and social care policy umbrellas.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

The study builds on two sets of data: a text analysis and an interview study. The first, an analysis of policy documents and consultation responses, provides the study with an overview of the official rhetoric on civil society involvement in decision making, alongside an overview of how the attempts to reform existing involvement practices were framed by the Government and key stakeholders. What it does not provide is the deeper contextualisation needed to understand what the attempted reform has meant for those affected by it, and how they have
interpreted its impacts. To achieve this deeper contextualisation and understanding, the main data source used has been semi-structured interviews with a total of 72 individuals from civil society and the public sector. Over the following pages, I detail how I have collected and analysed the two sets of data.

Analysis of policy texts and consultation responses

The purpose of the text analysis presented in chapter five has been to clarify how the ambition to reform civil society’s involvement in decision making was framed in official texts and consultation responses. How was change motivated? What problems or issues were identified as prompting a need for change? What solutions were proposed? The findings of this exercise then served as a springboard for the subsequent analysis of interviewees’ interpretations of the attempted reform’s meaning, spread and impacts.

Here, I found the conception of a policy ‘meaning audit’ as devised by Dvora Yanow particularly useful. As noted, a meaning audit is done in the anticipation that any policy development will mean different things to different actors, and that the way it is interpreted will have implications for its subsequent fate – and how that fate is interpreted in turn. The task of the researcher is to identify the different ways a policy has been framed and interpreted, in order to unveil the values that underlie these interpretations and to try to understand their implication for how it is disseminated and put to practice.

Text selection

I see the intention to reform civil society’s involvement in decision making as having been formally declared through the publication of the Agreement in 2008 and the Civil Society Bill in 2009. Both documents present a number of principles intended to guide future relations between the public sector and civil society, with the principles of ‘Dialogue’ and ‘Transparency’ being the most relevant here. It is in these two texts that information about the contents of the intended reform – what the Government sought to do – can be found. Details about how the reform attempts were motivated are also sought in these texts, as well as in other official documents that preceded or succeeded them. These additional documents were selected on the basis that they directly informed or reported on the creation of the two main reform documents. To identify the relevant texts, I drew on information gained in interviews and on references made in the two main reform documents. In this sense, I followed what Schwartz-Shea and

367 In this, I have not sought to do a full frame analysis (as endorsed by e.g. van Hulst & Yanow 2016, ‘From Policy “Frames” to “Framing”: Theorizing a More Dynamic, Political Approach’, American Review of Public Administration), as these tend to presuppose some degree of conflict of interest or ideology in the policy developments under analysis. Whilst the events studied here were undoubtedly the subject of conflicting interpretations, they were also characterised by significant levels of agreements on key premises, such as that civil society involvement was important and ought to be encouraged and improved. I.e., I did not identify sufficient tension in the reform’s conception to warrant a full frame analysis.
Yanow label ‘the intertextual trail’ leading “from initial documents to related ones”. This was done to identify texts that either had informed or that represented the official Government stance on civil society involvement at the time. Also included in the analysis are civil society organisations’ consultation responses to the official texts. The selected texts are, in chronological order:

Official texts:
- Instructions to the Popular Movement Commission (Dir. 2005:117, *Den statliga folkrörelsepolitiken i framtiden*)
- Additional Instructions to the Popular Movement Commission (Dir. 2007:7, *Tilläggsdirektiv till Folkrörelseutredningen*)
- The Agreement between the Swedish Government, national idea-based organisations in the social sphere and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (IJ2008/2110/UF, *Överenskommelsen mellan Regeringen, Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting och idéburna organisationer inom det sociala området*)
- The Civil Society Bill (Prop 2009/10:5, *Politiken för det civila samhället*)

Consultation responses:
- Resmiss responses to the Popular Movement Commission Report
- Consultation responses to the draft Agreement
- Consultation responses to the draft Civil Society Bill

Before turning to the description of the analysis, it is helpful to briefly consider what types of texts these are and the broader discourses of which they are part.

Official texts
The majority of texts that I label ‘official texts’ belong to the genre of official government publications. These are typically authored by public servants and characterised by a formal and passive language, even if the underlying political message may be strong. As noted, the use of symbolic language to signal a

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368 Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012, p.70, 84-89.
369 See Primary sources under References for a full list of the submissions included in the analysis. Only submissions that in some way addressed civil society involvement in decision making were included in the corpus.
370 Among the texts analysed here, the Popular Movement Commission Report and the Agreement constitute exceptions from this genre, for reasons outlined below.
commitment to certain values and evoke particular interpretations among target audiences is commonplace in public administration reform texts.  

Each of the official texts selected for analysis here provide a slightly different perspective on the background to and contents of the studied reform attempts. The two Instructions to the Popular Movement Commission, firstly, set out the then Social Democratic Government’s reasons for commissioning a review of its civil society policy. Among these was the observation that new social and political challenges along with changed patterns of civic engagement had led to a change in circumstances for Swedish civil society organisations. One of the items to be reviewed by the commission was the Government’s ‘dialogue’ with ‘associational life’.

The resulting Popular Movement Commission Report differs from the other official documents in that it is a product of a Governmental Commission. This means that while its final report is an official document, published by the department that appointed the Commission, the author of the report is not the Government but an autonomous body. This, along with the way they are created, sets commission reports apart from other government publications. The Popular Movement Commission Report presents the requested review of the Government’s civil society policy, including evaluations of past ‘dialogue’ activities and suggestions for future improvements. Among them was the proposal that relations between the sectors could be improved through the establishment of some form of ‘rules of the game’ (spelregler).

When the Commission Report was launched in 2007, this recommendation was already about to be realised through the newly elected Alliance Government’s decision to launch an Agreement process. The Decision to Initiate the Agreement sets out the Government’s intentions for this process, emphasising its ambitions to make it easier for non-profit organisations to act as service providers in health and social care.

The Agreement document that resulted from this process differs from typical government publications in both form and authorship. It was co-authored by representatives from all three signatories of the Agreement: the Government, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions and a group of idea-based organisations. Some sections of the text were authored jointly by the three groups and others were produced by them separately. The writing of the joint statements thus necessitated a degree of mutual compromise, with the consequence that the Government’s original aims for the Agreement were adjusted to accommodate the other signatories’ needs and perspectives.

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373 Dir. 2005:117, Den statliga folkrörelsepolitiken i framtiden; Dir. 2007:7, Tilläggstablett till Folkrörelseutredningen.
374 In the case at hand, the instructions to the Popular Movement Commission were given by the Social Democratic Government in 2005. By the time the final report was published in 2007, however, the centre-right Alliance had assumed power.
376 This decision was taken after civil society representatives had lobbied for such a process for several years; see chapter four for details.
The Government’s Report on the Agreement provides a background to and retrospective assessment of the ‘dialogue’ process through which the Agreement was created, alongside an overview of the Government’s plans for its implementation.

In the Civil Society Bill, finally, the six principles from the Agreement are reintroduced and extended to all government policy areas “where civil society operates”.

The importance of ‘dialogue’ is reiterated and there is a dedicated chapter on ‘Dialogue and consultation with civil society organisations’. This chapter includes a review of past Bills, Commission Reports and international writings and developments relating to public sector-civil society ‘dialogue’. Also taken into account are consultation responses to the Popular Movement Commission Report and to an earlier draft of the Bill’s recommendations.

Consultation responses

The civil society consultation responses belong to a very different text category. There is no set format for remiss submissions, and they vary greatly in tone and style. Submissions are often short, at times no more than a couple of paragraphs long. Sometimes, groups of organisations draft joint responses, or submit identical submissions from different senders.

Another aspect that sets the consultation responses apart from the other texts in the analysis is that the scope of their contributions was largely set by the authors of consultation documents to which they were responding. Although organisations sometimes use their remiss submissions to raise additional issues that they want the Government to attend to, this is not their primary purpose and it is a relatively rare occurrence. The decision to analyse consultation responses rather than other types of writings by civil society organisations has been made in awareness that the Government holds this privileged position in setting the policy agenda and the terms for its relationship with civil society. The intention is that the interviews with civil society representatives redress any imbalance of perspectives caused by this bias.

Written consultations were conducted on three of the official texts included in the analysis: the Popular Movement Commission Report, in the form of a traditional remiss procedure after the report’s publication; the Agreement, in the form of a three-month “consideration period” during which the draft document was posted on the Government’s website with an open call for comments; and the Civil Society Bill, in the form of the unusual decision to invite comments on the draft Bill before it was finalised.

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381 It should also be acknowledged, however, that external factors such as pressures from civil society organisations (including through consultation responses) and international bodies have contributed to shaping the Government’s writings on public sector – civil society relations.
Cross-referencing and the presence of overriding discourses

A notable aspect of the selected texts is that they frequently cross-reference each other. One example of this is how the research findings from the *Popular Movement Commission Report* are reiterated in the *Civil Society Bill* and elsewhere. Both of these texts also make frequent references to the findings of the earlier *Democracy Commission*, among other research studies. Another type of cross-referencing exists between the official texts and the consultation responses. This occurs in both directions, both because the themes covered in the latter are largely pre-set by the consultation papers, and because some of the official texts have taken consultation responses into account before being published. At times, the amount of cross-referencing between the texts makes it difficult to identify the source of a particular perspective.

A further aspect of the selected texts is that they are simultaneously formed by and contributing to a number of overriding discourses. These include ongoing debates about how and by whom public services should be provided; about the definition, delimitation and function of civil society in Sweden today and about the value and inherent challenges of involving businesses and civil society actors in public decision making.

Coding and analysis of text sources

The analysed texts thus differ in a number of ways, pertaining to authorship, political origins, focus, purpose, length and genre. Due to these differences and the high amount of cross-referencing between them, the texts are not suitable for tracking changes in language or emphasis between them or over time. For the purposes of this study, they are instead used as a collection of sources from which I build an understanding of how the attempts to reform civil society involvement practices were framed at the time of their conception.

In practical terms, this part of the analysis began with the selected texts being scanned for sections addressing civil society’s role in influencing public decisions. These text sections were then coded, using the qualitative analysis software Nvivo. Official texts and consultation responses were coded separately. This was to aid later identification of any differences between the two types of sources, but also to avoid the coding of one text group inadvertently steering the coding of the second into the same set of themes. The final coding structure for official texts had the following headings:

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382 This was the case with the *Agreement* and the *Civil Society Bill*.
383 As would be required to conduct a content analysis (Bergström & Boréus 2012, *Textens mening och makt. Metodbok i samlingsvetenskaplig text- och diskursanalys*, ch.2) as a complement to the examination of the reform’s framing in text, an option that was explored and rejected on the grounds of the reasons mentioned here.
• Why involve civil society in public decision making?
• Why change the ways of involvement?
  o What existing issues or problems are referred to (explicitly or implicitly)?
  o What other factors appear as sources of influence for a reform of involvement practices?
• What solutions are proposed?
  o How ought civil society involvement to be conducted?
  o What issues require civil society involvement?
  o Who should be involved in public sector-civil society interactions?
  o When in the decision-making processes is civil society involvement meant to take place?
• What commitments are made?
• What, according to the texts, is new in these proposals? What differentiates them from past practices?

In the next step, these main headings were coded into subcategories representing the different themes that emerged inductively from the texts. As the analysis progressed and new queries emerged, these were added to the coding structure. For instance, when the term ‘dialogue’ was identified as filling a key and sometimes symbolic function in both texts and interviews, one coding section was devoted to the definitions and uses of this term. In the later stages of analysis, I used the different coding structures for official texts, civil society submissions and interviews to identify similarities and differences between text types, between texts and interviews and over time. The findings of this exercise are presented in chapter five.

**Document study**

In addition to the text analysis, I conducted document reviews from the two levels of study: national level health and social care policy and Uppsala local authority. These reviews included documentation from the creation, implementation and monitoring of the two ‘agreement’ processes that have taken place in the two settings. Documents included decisions, invitations, agendas, transcripts, evaluations, consultation responses and reports. These document reviews were limited in scope and were not systematically coded. They served primarily to provide background knowledge about the social and political context in which the studied policy developments took place and as a basis for the descriptions of formal dissemination activities provided in chapter six.

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384 The ‘how’, ‘what’, ‘who’ and ‘when’ questions here are inspired by similar questioning often used to categorise different types of governance mechanisms, which may be applied at different levels of government, at different times in a policy process and target different stakeholder groups. See e.g. Jacobsson, Pierre & Sundström 2015, p.51-53, for a variation and discussion.
Interview study

Selection of respondents

Interview respondents were individuals from the public sector and civil society who were in some way affected by the attempted reform: as instigators, disseminators, target audiences, process participants, or a combination thereof. These included public servants tasked with implementing the reform, elected representatives promoting it and civil society representatives for whom the reform had implications for their relationships with the public sector. As noted in the introductory chapter, including civil society representatives in the interview study was considered necessary as this group was instrumental in both shaping and disseminating the studied reform, whilst also being directly affected by its outcomes. In this way, civil society organisations are uniquely positioned to reflect on the reform’s implications for their relationship to the public sector.

Respondents were selected using a purposive sampling approach, meaning that they were chosen on the assumption that they would be able to provide the richest and most informed insights on my research topics.385 At both the national and the local level, the above-mentioned agreements between the public sector and civil society organisations served as the starting point for the selection of interviewees. This meant that I sought out individuals who had been involved in the creation of the agreements or who were identifiable as their target audiences. In the initial rounds of interviewing,386 a snowball technique387 was used to identify potential respondents, with each interview ending with a question about which additional people would be able to provide further information or a different perspective on the questions asked. With the first rounds of national-level interviews having included more civil society representatives than public servants, I sought to redress this imbalance in the last round by interviewing more public servants from the Government Offices and public agencies. Individuals from the public sector who volunteered or were nominated to be interviewed in this study were typically people whose job descriptions included civil society involvement in some form. In civil society, interviewees were often senior staff members or individuals with experience of seeking to influence decision makers. Whilst this ensured that respondents were for the most part well informed on the topics addressed in the interviews, a drawback is that they were not necessarily representative of their wider environments. In other words, it is possible that not all of their colleagues were equally aware of the reform’s ideas and implementation activities. Whilst it is not the ambition of this study to make generalisable inferences from the findings, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge this caveat.

The selected interviewees were not, however, identified as ‘elite’ respondents. In recognition that non-elite actors tend to play important roles in

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386 The first round of interviews at the national level 2009 and the Uppsala interviews in 2014.
387 Patton 2002, p.237
both shaping policies and determining their fate, I sought to identify individuals who could provide different perspectives on the developments studied.388 Thus efforts were made to include those who were targeted by the reform ideas but had little ability to influence their contents, and those who questioned the reform’s value. This meant that I sought to interview civil society representatives from different types and sizes of organisation, including both organisations that had signed the national and local agreements and some that had chosen not to. Public servants were drawn from different public bodies and, at times, from different departments within these. To ensure a spread of political perspectives, I further sought to interview elected representatives and party members from different political parties.389

In total, 72 respondents took part in 82 separate interviews. Seven respondents were interviewed twice and four respondents were interviewed three times (2009, 2011, 2016). Four interviews were conducted with two respondents present. A list of respondents is provided in the appendix.

Interviews, coding and analysis

Four rounds of interviews were conducted. The first two rounds of national-level interviews took place in 2009 and 2011390 as part of the follow-up study of the national Agreement mentioned above.391 Interviews in Uppsala were carried out in 2014, with a brief follow-up interview conducted by telephone in 2017.392 A final round of national-level interviews took place in the autumn and winter of 2016-2017. The interviews were semi-structured, ranging in length from approximately 30-75 minutes.

In interviews, the use of an interpretive approach meant that respondents were treated not so much as providers of information about the studied events, but as unique examples of how these events could be interpreted.393 To this end, the style of interviewing was conversational. The questions asked were kept inductive and open, allowing respondents to articulate their interpretations of the reform and events with their own words. This was also intended to reduce the risk of the interviews being overly steered by the theoretical literature or my own prior knowledge.394

Each interview started with the respondent being asked to describe how they experienced civil society’s involvement in public decision making in their department or organisation at the time. Public servants were asked in what ways civil society organisations gave input in their area of work and civil society...
representatives were asked to describe their methods for influencing public decision makers available to them. These introductory questions served to establish the focus of the interviews and to give me an orientation in the different practices used in the participating organisations.\textsuperscript{395}

The remaining questions pertained to respondents’ interpretations of the meaning of and impacts of the studied reform. Whilst broadly the same themes were covered in each interview, different interview guides were created to match the sector and position of the respondents. These interview guides were primarily used as a checklist, referred to at the end of each interview to ensure that all main themes had been covered.

The broad themes addressed in public sector interviews were: \textsuperscript{396}

- Respondents’ interpretations of the current relationship between the public sector and civil society (methods used, topics addressed, timings of involvement activities, selection of participants, etc).
- Respondents’ views on the aims, advantages and disadvantages of involving civil society in public decision making.
- Respondents’ awareness and interpretations of the studied reform ideas.
- Respondents’ interpretations of the reasons for reforming involvement practices (awareness of problems with past approaches, other sources of inspiration for change).
- Respondents’ observations of the means with which the reform had spread and their relative efficacy for ensuring compliance with the reform ideas.
- Respondents’ observations of changes in attitudes and practices affecting the public sector-civil society relationship in the years following the Government’s endorsement of the reform ideas.
- Respondents’ observations of problems and challenges affecting the implementation of the reform ideas and the public sector-civil society relationship more broadly.
- Respondents’ general attitudes to the reform ideas.

The interviews were transcribed\textsuperscript{397} and then coded and analysed using the Nvivo qualitative analysis software. Interviews from 2009 and 2011, stemming from the follow-up study of the \textit{Agreement}, were subjected to a slightly different handling process. These interviews focused on the creation, implementation and impacts of all six principles of the \textit{Agreement} document, and were thus broader

\textsuperscript{395} The findings of these questions are briefly summarised in chapter 7, under the heading \textit{The relationship today}.

\textsuperscript{396} Note that the first two rounds of interviews, conducted in 2009 and 2011, were broader in remit as they addressed the implementation of all six principles in the \textit{Agreement}. When these interviews were re-analysed for the purpose of this thesis, only the parts pertaining to civil society’s involvement in public decision making were included in the analysis.

\textsuperscript{397} With the exception of a small number of interviews conducted in 2009 where notes were taken instead. With the interviews from 2011 which were conducted by Marie Nordfeldt, then at Ersta Sköndal University College, I listened to the interview recordings and transcribed only the passages that pertained to the questions addressed in this study.
in scope than this study, which focuses primarily on issues covered in the ‘Dialogue’ principles. In handling these early recordings or transcripts, I first identified the parts of the interviews that pertained to civil society’s opportunities to influence policy. Only these extracts were included in the subsequent coding and analysis.

Again, the analysis began by coding the data according to a set of overriding questions: Why involve civil society in decision making?; Why reform the modes of involvement?; By what mechanisms have the reform ideas spread?; Have any changes been observed following the attempted reform?; What problems and challenges remain?; and What drivers and obstacles affect the reform’s implementation?

In a second step, each heading was coded into sub-categories. Here, the questions that were primarily empirical were coded inductively, whereas the coding of those that linked to the theoretical framework followed more abductive logic. In this, I used a coding structure that was partly shaped by my theoretical perspectives, whilst remaining open to the possibility of new insights necessitating the addition of new coding categories. As such, I continuously moved between the field data and the theoretical literature, allowing new questions to be asked as they arose from either new readings of the literature or from the data itself. In this way, the analytical framework and coding structure emerged in tandem and incrementally, rather than the former (or my own, prior understandings of the research topics) steering the latter along a predetermined path.

Using this approach meant that there were no predetermined theoretical concepts to operationalise before analysis began. Rather, the process of matching themes emerging from the data with existing theoretical concepts was ongoing. To exemplify, the frequent mention in interviews of there being a mismatch between the involvement activities that public organisations reported in audits and the actual activities observed by respondents, resonated with constructivist institutionalist theories of ‘decoupling’ and accounts for that concept being included in the analytical framework.

Moreover, the coding of the policy texts, consultation responses and interviews influenced each other, so that when a theme emerged as significant in one data source, I would look for it also in the other sources. This helped identify themes that had been overlooked in the initial coding of these other sources, but also revealed topics on which they were silent – a sometimes more telling finding when comparing official and unofficial policy rhetorics. An example is how arguments explicitly linking civil society involvement to

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\*\*This category included both respondents’ own views and their interpretations of the reform initiators’ motivations.

\*\*\*Why involve civil society in decision making?; Why reform the modes of involvement?; By what mechanisms have the reform ideas spread?; Have any changes been observed following the attempted reform?; What problems and challenges remain?


\*\*\*\*\*Haverland & Yanow 2012; Schwartz-Schea & Yanow 2012.

democratic principles were more prevalent in the earlier than in the later policy
texts analysed, and were largely absent from the interviews.404

Benefits and risks of conducting secondary analysis of interview data
As noted, the first two rounds of interviews took place in 2009 and 2011 within
the framework of the above-mentioned follow-up study to the Agreement. The
interviews in 2009 were conducted by me and the 2011 interviews by Marie
Nordfeldt, then at Ersta Sköndal University College. Reusing interview
materials for new purposes in this way is not unusual. Indeed, there are many
potential benefits of doing so, including that it can make possible the generation
of more extensive and nuanced insights about a studied phenomenon and that it
can create opportunities for exploring longitudinal lines of inquiry that would
otherwise not be possible.405

In this study, the early material did indeed serve several important functions.
It contained valuable data that informed my findings, as is demonstrated by the
numbers of early interviews referenced in the forthcoming empirical chapters. It
also highlighted topics that merited further investigation, thus helping to shape
the research questions for this study as well as subsequent interview guides and
my coding structures.

However, secondary analysis also comes with certain risks that ought to be
acknowledged and addressed. One potential drawback of conducting secondary
analysis of one’s own or somebody else’s old interviews is that it can raise
ethical issues pertaining to confidentiality and informed consent.406 In this study,
the confidentiality issue was addressed by the same method of anonymisation
being used in this thesis as in the original study. The informed consent issue was
resolved by respondents from both rounds giving their consent for the reusal of
the interview materials.407

Another potential drawback of secondary analysis of interview data pertains
to the ‘fit’ between the new and the old study. A poor fit risks affecting the
validity of the secondary findings.408 In this case, there were indeed some
differences in focus between the original study and this PhD project. As
mentioned, the original interviews were wider in remit than this study’s narrow
focus on civil society’s involvement in public decision making. Thus, when
interview recordings were listened to again for the purpose of this thesis, only
the sections that pertained to this particular aspect of the public sector-civil
society relationship were included in the secondary analysis. At times, this

404 See chapter five.
405 Heaton 2004, Reworking Qualitative Data; Long-Sutehall, Sque & Addington-Hall 2010, ‘Secondary analysis of
qualitative data: a valuable method for exploring sensitive issues with an elusive population’; Journal of Research in
Nursing; Thorne 1998, 'Ethical and representational issues in qualitative secondary analysis', Qualitative Health Re-
search.
407 Respondents in 2011 gave this consent at the time of the interviews. Respondents in the 2009 round were asked for
their consent during the writing of this thesis.
408 Heaton 2004; Thorne 1998.
amounted to no more than a few minutes’ worth of recording in a much longer interview.

The difference in focus also meant that slightly different approaches to respondent selection were used in the different studies. The original follow-up study only included respondents directly affected by the Agreement and prioritised hearing civil society perspectives. To redress this imbalance, the later rounds of interviews included more elected representatives and public servants.

Another factor to be aware of in secondary analysis is that it increases the distance between the analyst and respondents. This brings the risk that the analyst misinterprets the original data or asks new questions of it that inadvertently skew the respondents’ intended message.409 Here, the fact that I had carried out the majority of the early interviews and had been involved in drafting the interview guide for the second round ensured that I was well aware of the context in which they had taken place. Differences in contexts and questions were something that I sought to keep in mind throughout the analytical process.

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4. Background: civil society and the Swedish welfare state

As outlined in the introductory chapter, the period in which this study is set was one of change and renegotiation for the public sector-civil society relationship in Sweden. This thesis focuses on one aspect of these changes – namely, attempts to reform civil society’s involvement in public decision making on health and social care policy. Yet this particular dimension of change cannot be viewed in isolation from the wider transformations that have affected Swedish civil society, and in particular organisations active in health and social care policy, in the 1990s and the early decades of the twenty-first century. Among the more debated of these developments has been an alleged shift in the division of labour and responsibility between the public sector and civil society.410 In stark contrast to a past where civil society organisations were considered key to the shaping of social policy but rarely as part of its execution, they are now frequently pushed – at least at the rhetorical level – to play an active role in the production of public services.411

This chapter outlines some of the historical and institutional events that form the social and political context for this study,412 alongside an introduction to the key academic debates concerning the changing civil society-public sector relationship in Sweden. The chapter begins with a brief exposition of the functions and interpretations of ‘civil society’ as a concept and a sector in the Swedish context.

410 Andersson, Erlandsson & Sundström 2017; Wijkström 2012
412 Here, I concentrate on the period leading up to the policy events in focus in this study. Developments that took place after the publications of the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill are not included in these accounts.
4.1 What is Swedish civil society?

There are no fixed concepts used to describe Swedish civil society and its organisations. The continually evolving terminology surrounding the sector is symptomatic of how competing views of what civil society is and what its functions should be have shaped the terms used to describe it. It is also a consequence of the challenge of capturing what is a highly diverse group of organisations under a single label.

Among the terms commonly used to describe this social sphere are ‘the voluntary sector’ (den ideella sektorn/frivilligsektorn), ‘associational life’ (föreningslivet), ‘the third sector’ (den tredje sektorn), ‘the popular movements’ (folkrörelserna), ‘the idea-based sector’ (den idéburna sektorn) and ‘the social economy’ (den sociala ekonomin). These are all umbrella terms used to capture a range of different associational forms, which may include some or all of the following: ‘voluntary organisations’ (ideella organisationer/frivilligorganisationer), ‘idea-based organisations’ (idéburna organisationer), ‘popular movements’ (folkrörelser), ‘foundations’ (stiftelser), ‘interest groups’ (intresseorganisationer), ‘new social movements’ (nya sociala rörelser), ‘religious associations’ (trossamfund) and ‘nonprofit organisations’ (icke-vinstdrivande företag), among others.

Any confusion caused by this terminological diversity is likely compounded by the fact that there is considerable overlap both between the terms used and the levels of description they refer to. The term ‘popular movements’ is a case in point. It describes both a specific type of organisation and the sector as a whole, in both cases being used synonymously with other terms, such as ‘voluntary organisation/sector’. Attempts within the sector and the academic and political communities to agree on which terms to use when have had little success, and new terms keep appearing to reflect international influences, shifting political rhetoric or new coalitions forming within the sector.

Thus the term ‘popular movements’, which is strongly associated with the Social Democratic welfare state model, has become less common in government texts, whereas terms such as ‘civil society’ and ‘voluntary associations’ (ideella föreningar) have since grown in popularity.413 Similarly, when Sweden joined the European Union in 1995, the term ‘social economy’ experienced an upswing in the local government sector in response to the European Social Fund’s requirements that grant recipients should have a policy for its relations with the ‘social economy’.414

Another example of how terminological changes reflect broader policy developments is the term ‘idea-based organisation’. The term was chosen as the

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413 According to a survey of Social Ministry publications from the years 2007 and 2010 conducted as part of Ersta Sköndal University College’s follow-up of the Agreement. This terminological shift was explicitly called for in the Civil Society Bill, which states that “... the terms ‘popular movements’ and ‘popular movement policy’ [should be] replaced with the broader concepts ‘civil society’ and ‘civil society organisations’”. See Prop.2009/10:55, p.47.
414 Gavelin 2011.
preferred umbrella term to describe the organisations affected by the Agreement between the Swedish Government, national idea-based organisations in the social sphere and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR).415 The organisations involved in drafting the document chose this label on the basis that alternative terms, such as ‘voluntary associations’ or ‘nonprofit organisations’, were not considered sufficiently inclusive to accommodate all the organisations involved. Using the ‘idea-based’ label meant that the cooperative movement could be included in the definition, including, controversially, for-profit cooperatives.

The definition of idea-based organisations presented in the Agreement is at once broad and vague, declaring that these are “organisations within the voluntary and nonprofit sector and the cooperative movement [that] may be profit-making and generally have some form of more general humane mission (allmännmänskligt uppdrag). They are self-governing and often have a volunteer component and are run with an ideological awareness (idealitet)” 416

Such a broad definition is typical of the terms used to describe civil society and its members; yet its breadth is problematic. Not only does the term ‘idea-based organisations’ lack a clear demarcation from other sectors (are not for-profit businesses also based on ideas and values?), but it also holds strong normative connotations, which risk giving a skewed impression of the organisations referred to. This is exemplified by how the Swedish Government, in its preface to the Agreement, refers to idea-based organisations’ “democratic function” and their role in “giving voice to interests” and “moulding opinions” (röstbärare/opinionsbildare), despite the fact that idea-based organisations, according to the definition set out in the same document, need neither be democratically set up nor involved in giving voice to interest groups. In fact, many of those taking part in the Agreement process were neither.417

Broad definitions and normative undertones are thus shared characteristics of the terms used to describe civil society, and the civil society concept itself is no exception.418 Its entry into the Swedish language is relatively recent, having gained acceptance in the 2000s, after being dismissed as too vague and ideological in the eighties and early nineties.419 In those days, the concept was primarily associated with right-leaning critics of the welfare state, who presented civil society, in which they included the family and neighbourhoods as well as churches and associations, as an alternative and more desirable source of...
social security than the state. Historian Lars Trägårdh has described how the civil society concept, due to this ideological association and because of its rather fluffy and imprecise quality, was initially met with scepticism in Swedish academic circles. He suggests that this was in part a consequence of how in the past, research on what we now call civil society tended to focus on the historical role of the popular movements in the creation of the Swedish welfare state. According to Trägårdh, this gave a rather slanted perspective that overemphasised the role of organisations with a civic purpose and a worldview that corresponded with the Social Democratic welfare project. Associations with more frivolous functions, such as sport or culture, or those representing alternative views on how society should be organised, were left out of the narrative. Among those that tended to be overlooked were philanthropic and self-help organisations, the mere existence of which jarred with the Social Democratic vision of a society where people should not have to rely on the whims of charity for their needs to be met.

The effect of this being the dominant perspective on what we now call civil society was that, for a long time, the true diversity of Swedish associational life was underestimated. This changed in the 1990s, when a series of new research projects shifted focus from the perceived role of the popular movements in the past to the diverse nature and functions of contemporary Swedish civil society. These studies found that despite (or because of, depending on who you ask) its strong state and large public sector, Sweden had a large and highly active civil society – in economic terms, in terms of the range of organisations and associations active within it and in terms of the sheer numbers of Swedes engaged in voluntary work in some form. In the absence of another term to capture and describe these disparate activities, and due in part to the influences of international scholars, the civil society concept became established as the dominant, if by no means only, label used to describe the sector. Today, it is widely if not universally deemed to be both legitimate and useful, and there is a thriving research community devoted to its study.

With the focus of this study being government policy, the definition of civil society I adhere to here broadly follows that endorsed by the Swedish Government. It describes civil society as a sector, separate from the state, the market and private households, where individuals, groups and organisations act

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together in common interest without seeking to make profits from their activities.\footnote{Prop. 2009/10:55: 28. For an academic discussion about the concept, see e.g. von Essen & Sundgren 2012 (p.23 for a definition).} In this thesis, I primarily use the terms ‘civil society’ and ‘civil society organisations’, except when referring to a specific type of organisation, such as nonprofit service provider, or when the context calls for a different term, such as in reference to the idea-based signatories of the Agreement.

4.2 Civil society and the Swedish welfare state: a brief history

The functions that civil society organisations perform in Swedish society differ between policy fields and tend to shift as the economic and political climate changes. With the primary focus of this dissertation being the role that civil society organisations play in health and social care policy, a brief background to this context is called for.

A number of attempts have been made to classify the different functions that civil society organisations perform in the Swedish welfare system.\footnote{One is theologian Erik Blennberger’s categorisation of four functions that the voluntary sector may serve vis-à-vis the welfare state: ‘avant-garde’, ‘complement’, ‘alternative’ or ‘substitute’. The ‘avant-garde’ function refers to when civil society organisations identify and draw attention to social needs that are not yet provided for by the public sector. When they function as a ‘complement’, they are a parallel social resource in the sense that they provide services that are also in some form provided by the public sector, but without any competitive element between them. Organisations categorised as ‘alternatives’ to the public sector provide versions of services offered in the public sector. They have the same legitimacy as their public counterparts and their relationship with them is a competitive one. The ‘substitute’ category, finally, refers to organisations providing services previously offered within the public sector, often through public contracts won in a tendering process. SOU 1993-82 Frivilligt socialt arbete. Kartläggning och kunskapsöversikt.} Often, scholars make a simple distinction between organisations providing a service and those providing a voice.\footnote{E.g. Lundström & Wijkström 1995, Från röst till service?. To these two overarching categories, Harding 2012 adds three additional functions that civil society organisations may perform in society and for individual members: providing kinship (gemenskap), acting as ‘democracy schools’ (demokratiskola) and acting as a counterweight to the state and private sector (motvikt till staten och näringslivet). See Harding 2012, Framtidens civilsamhälle. Underlagsrapport 3 till Framtidskommissionen, p.26.} The voice category contains organisations whose primary activities are to aggregate the needs and experiences of their members or interest groups and bring these to the attention of decision makers. This is done by means of lobbying, campaigning and participating in various advisory or decision-making fora. The service category, as the name suggests, refers to organisations offering some type of service to the public, whether on a voluntary basis or as a public contractor.\footnote{Following Blennberger (SOU 1993:82), these can be differentiated by those acting as a complement, alternative or substitute to public services.}\footnote{This can be contrasted with e.g. sports or culture, where civil society organisations have played a more prominent role in initiating and running state-funded activities.}

For most of the second half of the twentieth century, civil society organisations’ role in the fields of health and social care was largely, if not entirely, restricted to the voice category.\footnote{This can be contrasted with e.g. sports or culture, where civil society organisations have played a more prominent role in initiating and running state-funded activities.} Organisations filling this role were traditionally membership-based, staffed primarily by volunteers and funded by grants, membership fees and donations. Their primary function was to draw...
attention to the needs and interests of the groups and causes they represented and to advocate on their behalf in policy processes. In return, these organisations provided policy makers with ongoing input from their fields of expertise, helped legitimise decisions and policies and, it was often argued, acted as ‘democracy schools’ in which citizens were trained in democratic ideas and practices. More recently, the traditional voice-giving organisations have been accompanied by a growth of ad-hoc and loosely formed associations and campaigning networks, often organised around specific policy issues and sometimes forming part of a global movement. There has also been a reported increase in nonprofit advocacy organisations, staffed by professional campaigners and lobbyists.

Despite the historical emphasis on civil society’s voice function in health and social care, however, some organisations also have a history of providing services in this field. In areas such as care for homeless people, victims of domestic violence and help or self-help for drug and alcohol addiction, civil society organisations have tended to function as an alternative or complement to the state. These organisations have been more likely to have paid staff and be funded by public sector contracts, although this has not always been the case.

In practice, many organisations transcend the categories by engaging in both voice- and service-related activities at once. One example is women’s shelters that may simultaneously offer services to women and children affected by domestic violence, and advocate on their behalf in policy processes. Another example is organisations that provide treatment to substance abusers whilst also seeking to influence drug and alcohol policy.

A welfare state in transformation?

Since the 1980s, the Swedish public sector has undergone a series of political, economic and administrative changes that have affected both the perceived and actual functions that civil society organisations perform in decision making and public service provision. One aspect of these developments was the decline of corporatist decision-making practices and the subsequent revived interest in alternative mechanisms for civil society involvement, to be explored below and

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436 Wijkström & Lundström 2002, Den ideella sektorn. Organisationerna i det civila samhället. Women’s shelters are examples of non-profit service providers that have been staffed in large part by volunteers.
in later chapters. Another departure from the traditional Swedish model with implications for civil society organisations has been a wider political acceptance for involving non-state actors – including both for-profit and nonprofit organisations – in the delivery of public services.\footnote{Blomqvist 2004; Hartman 2011.} As will be discussed below, however, the majority of the new public service contracts have been awarded to for-profit business, indicating that the practical impacts of this shift for civil society organisations appears to have not been as widespread as some anticipated.\footnote{Hartman 2011; Sivesind 2017; Svedberg & Olsson 2010.}

Policies challenging Sweden’s state-led and state-run welfare model started to emerge in the late 1980s and early 1990s.\footnote{Andersson, Erlandsson & Sundström 2017; Hartman 2011; SOU 1987:33 Ju mer vi är tillsammans. Betänkande från 1986 års folkrörelseutredning. Del ett.} Prior to that time, the Swedish model stood out in international comparisons by its near-complete state monopoly on service provision.\footnote{Blomqvist 2004.} The first steps away from this path were taken by the Social Democrats in the late 1980s, when they adopted a more market-oriented profile through the decentralisation of education, health care and social services.\footnote{Andersson, Erlandsson & Sundström 2017; Blomqvist 2004.} At this time, the Social Democratic Government also began to show a new openness to nonprofit service delivery.\footnote{An example is how, in its instructions to a public commission on popular movements in 1986, the Social Democratic Government tasked the commission with exploring opportunities for ‘organisational life’ to collaborate with or take over certain public services. See e.g. SOU 1987:33 and Dir. 1986:17 (included as an annex in SOU 1987:35 SOU 1987:35 Ju mer vi är tillsammans. Del tre. Underlag för reformer samt förslag).} A new Local Government Act, introduced by the Social Democrats in 1991, gave new freedoms to local authorities to outsource public services and to restructure their internal organisation along a purchaser-provider model.\footnote{This meant that many local authorities adopted an internal structure inspired by the private market, where the purchasers of public services (directed by the political leadership) were kept organisationally separated from the sections that delivered services. These were sometimes made to compete with private actors for contracts. Erlandsson et al. 2013, ‘Marketising trends in Swedish eldercare: Competition, choice and calls for stricter regulation’, in Meagher & Szebehely (eds) Marketisation in Nordic eldercare: A research report on legislation, oversight, extent and consequences, p.26-27.}

These events were followed by a series of welfare reforms initiated by the Moderate Party Government in 1991-1994 to further promote user choice in public services. In practice, this meant that ‘quasi-markets’ were being created in the fields of health and social care, through which local and regional authorities could purchase services from public and private providers.\footnote{Blomqvist 2004.} The reforms, which have since been labelled the beginnings of a “choice revolution” in the Swedish welfare sector,\footnote{Andersson, Erlandsson & Sundström 2017; Blomqvist 2004.} were justified as a means to cut public spending whilst simultaneously empowering citizens by granting them a degree of control over the services they received from the state.\footnote{Andersson, Erlandsson & Sundström 2017, ch.2.}

If the political enthusiasm for these measures faded somewhat when the Social Democrats returned to power in 1994, little was done to reverse them in
the years that followed. If anything, the Social Democratic Government continued much in the same vein, with public spending under continued review and the curbing of state responsibilities an explicitly stated ambition.447

Thus in the first half of the 1990s, the gap between the political left and right appeared to be closing, with something akin to a consensus forming on the advantages of competition, consumer choice and the notion that the state should maintain a more hands-off approach to the business sector.448 The rhetoric with which the political blocs motivated these reforms differed, however. In the book Marknadsstaten, authors Catrin Andersson, Magnus Erlandsson and Göran Sundström describe how the Moderate Party tended to link their welfare reforms to growth and cost-cutting, whereas the Social Democrats were more likely to portray theirs as means of achieving openness and empowerment in public service delivery.449

After the Alliance Parties'450 election win in 2006 came a re-intensification of market-inspired welfare reforms, some of which have since become solidified in law. One example is the passing of the Public Procurement Act (Lagen om offentlig upphandling) in 2007. The law was intended to ensure that all providers offering services to the public sector would compete on the same terms, through a transparent and heavily regulated system for public tenders. Another example is the Act on System of Choice in the Public Sector (Lagen om valfrihet), which took force in 2009. This law gave regional and local authorities the option of inviting private for-profit and nonprofit organisations to compete as health care service providers. Following an amendment to the law in 2010, health authorities are now obliged to provide a choice-based system in primary care services.451

These reforms are consistent with international trends showing a growing influence of business sector logics on public services. Often grouped together under the New Public Management (NPM) label, the driving idea behind these reforms is that introducing elements of competition and user choice to public services creates incentives for making services more cost-effective, flexible and

448 Andersson, Erlandsson & Sundström 2017, ch.2.
449 Ibid.
450 Consisting of the Moderate Party (Moderaterna), the Centre Party (Centerpartiet), the Liberal People’s Party (Folkpartiet Liberalerna, nowadays: Liberalerna) and the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna).
451 Hartman 2011.
452 Policies characteristic of New Public Management include devolved decision making, decentralised responsibility, an increased reliance on standardised, quantitative performance assessments and the search for more efficient and flexible service solutions, often through public services being contracted out to the private sector. Another feature of New Public Management is a tendency to view service users as customers and an emphasis on the public’s right to choose between a selection of services and providers. Despite New Public Management often being associated with outsourcing, however, its proponents tend to argue that type of ownership is of secondary importance. It is competition that is the key ingredient, not privatisation per se. Indeed, these policies rarely go so far as fully giving up control of public services to the market. More common is that services move a step or two away from state ownership and control towards less regulated forms of ownership and service delivery, where public providers compete with private and nonprofit organisations for tenders. See e.g. Denhardt & Denhardt 2000, ‘The New Public Service: Serving rather than Steering’, Public Administration Review; Megginson &Netter 2001, ‘From State to Market: A Survey of Empirical Studies on Privatization’, Journal of Economic Literature; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011.
innovative; traits that its advocates suggest have been missing in the public sector.\textsuperscript{453} Scholars tend to contrast these strategies with a more traditional Public Administration model, characterised by a centralised structure of government, clear hierarchies, the ideal of the neutral bureaucracy and a belief in representative democracy as the best route for citizens to influence decisions and services.\textsuperscript{454}

In Sweden, these reforms have likely had both ideological and practical origins.\textsuperscript{455} The influence of New Public Management across much of the political spectrum coincided with and was arguably fuelled by the financial crises that took place in the early 1990s and late 2000s. The recessions forced many regional and local authorities to review their public service provision, often with the result that parts of their operations were contracted out.\textsuperscript{456} At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, around one-fifth of welfare service staff in Sweden was employed by private businesses or nonprofit organisations.\textsuperscript{457} However, only a small proportion of these, around three per cent, were employed by nonprofit organisations.\textsuperscript{458} The largest proportion could be found in the fields of disability care, youth care and the treatment of drug and alcohol addiction, where approximately 50 per cent of staff was employed outside of the public sector.\textsuperscript{459}

Scholars of these reforms have been broadly in agreement that they represent a break from the traditional Swedish welfare state model and its “preference for shielding the sector against market forces in order to further the goal of social equality”.\textsuperscript{460} The political scientist Paula Blomqvist has suggested that post-reform, the public sector has come to be seen primarily as a service producer, with cost-effectiveness increasingly considered a measure of success. This, she argues, “is a far cry from the traditional, Social Democratic view of the public sector as an instrument of social transformation”.\textsuperscript{461} As pointed out by other scholars, another aspect of this development is that the state has expanded its notion of who it is meant to serve to more explicitly include the market alongside citizens.\textsuperscript{462}

Some scholars have interpreted these reforms as a radical departure from past tradition and as signs that Sweden is undergoing a shift from a ‘welfare state’ to a ‘welfare society’. Elaborating on this assessment, the economist Laura Hartman suggests that both models pursue the same goal: a universal welfare

\textsuperscript{454} Denhardt & Denhardt 2000, p.551, 554.
\textsuperscript{455} Sivesind 2017.
\textsuperscript{457} Hartman 2011, p.258; Sivesind 2017, p.39. Both studies cover education, health care and social services (which includes support for elderly and disabled people, child and juvenile welfare and substance abuse treatment).
\textsuperscript{458} Sivesind 2017, p.38-39.
\textsuperscript{459} Hartman 2011, p.258.
\textsuperscript{460} Blomqvist 2004, p.151. See also Andersson, Erlandsson & Sundström 2017; Blomqvist 2004; Lundquist 1998, Demokratins väktare; Sivesind 2017; Wijkström 2012.
\textsuperscript{461} Blomqvist 2004, p.151.
system where citizens are offered services on the basis of need, irrespective of their ability to pay. The difference lies in how services are produced. Whereas in the ‘welfare state’, it is the public sector that administers and delivers services, the ‘welfare society’ is built on the belief that introducing elements of choice and competition improves the state’s ability to achieve quality services for all.\(^\text{463}\) Again, it is worth remembering that whilst these developments may indeed mark a shift in the political rhetoric and perceptions of how and by whom public services are best provided, the majority of Swedish welfare services are still delivered by the public sector.\(^\text{464}\)

**Implications of welfare reforms for civil society**

For civil society organisations operating in the fields of health and social care, the effects of these reforms have perhaps been most keenly felt in changes to funding streams and in an increase in administrative requirements from funders. General organisational grants that are not tied to any specific activities, previously the most common public grant form,\(^\text{465}\) have shrunk both in relative and actual terms, whilst funding tied to specific activities and policy objectives have become more common; so has the contracting out of services to civil society organisations through public tenders.\(^\text{466}\) An effect of these changes in funding patterns is that the state’s and in particular local authorities’ ability to steer civil society organisations’ activities has increased.\(^\text{467}\)

This agenda was further boosted when, after their 2006 election victory, the Alliance Government called for a more diverse range of service providers (‘*en större mångfald utförare*’\(^\text{468}\)), including from civil society, in health and social care.\(^\text{469}\) It has been questioned, however, to what extent civil society organisations have really benefited from the deregulation of public services.

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\(^{463}\) Hartman 2011; see also Johansson, Nordfeldt & Johansson 2015; Wijkström 2012.

\(^{464}\) Hartman 2011; Sivesind 2017. This resonates with studies from other countries that have concluded that the underlying ‘institutional logic’ of welfare state regimes appears to have a constraining effect on how NPM-inspired reforms are implemented. A study of social services in Germany, Denmark and the US found that New Public Management reforms did not lead to significant privatisation of services traditionally provided by the state - indicating, the authors concluded, “the influence of existing institutions and path-dependent models”. Henriksen, Zimmer and Smith, 2009, ‘At the Eve of Convergence? Social Service Provision in Denmark, Germany and the United States.’ Paper presented at The 38th Annual ARNOVA Conference, p.40. For further discussions about the accuracy and ideological functions of the NPM ‘convergence myth’, see also Cheung 1997 and Goldfinch and Wallis 2010, ‘Two myths of convergence in Public Management Reform’, *Public Administration*.

\(^{465}\) Other common grant forms are activity grants (*verksamhetsbidrag*), project grants (*projektbidrag*), commissioning grants (*uppdragsbidrag*) and grants for buildings and venues (*anläggningsbidrag*). Statskontoret 2004, *Bidrag till ideella organisationer: Kartläggning, analys och rekommendationer*.


\(^{469}\) Prop.2009/10:55; Skr. 2008/09:207. In these discourses, nonprofit organisations are often portrayed as offering an ‘added value’ that sets them apart from public and profit-seeking service providers. They are expected to bring sought-after qualities such as local expertise, flexibility, informal or holistic working methods and a capacity for innovation. As such, they have been presented as offering a form of insurance against the negative effects of marketisation reforms, such as cost-cutting or profit-seeking measures negatively affecting service users’ experiences. See e.g. Gavelin, Kassman & Engel 2010; Hummre 2013; Hultén & Wijkström 2006, *Särart och mervärde i den ideella sektorn. En studie av ledares syn på de idekärna organisationernas betydelse*; Svedberg 1996.
Studies have suggested that although civil society organisations have taken on a slightly more prominent role in public service provision since the 1990s, the bulk of contracts post-deregulation has been awarded to for-profit business and in particular to large corporations, including international investors and venture capitalists. A study by Lars Svedberg and Lars Erik Olsson at Ersta Sköndal University College found that the number of employees in for-profit companies operating in health, education and social care increased by almost 400 per cent between 1990 and 2006, from 26,000 to 100,000. Meanwhile, the corresponding growth in the nonprofit sector was less than 10 per cent: from 32,000 to 35,000. Using later data from Statistics Sweden (SCB), Laura Hartman has confirmed this trend. She shows that whilst the number of nonprofit employees in the welfare field grew by a slightly more substantial 37 per cent between 2002 and 2010, here, too, the private sector emerged as the dominant player, having increased by 245 per cent over the same period.

Later studies have suggested that this trend continued in subsequent years. Political scientist Karl Henrik Sivesind writes that the nonprofit sector’s share of employees in Swedish public services peaked at 3.5 per cent in 2000, to decline slightly in the decade that followed. Its share of employees was smallest in healthcare (about 1 per cent) and largest in education (about 5 per cent). Meanwhile, the for-profit sector doubled its share of employees between 2000 and 2013, from 9 to 18 per cent, whilst the public sector’s share decreased, from 88 to 78 per cent, over the same time period.

The implications of these developments for Swedish civil society have been much debated both in academia and within the sector itself. Some scholars have proposed that they have brought about a fundamental change of character for the affected organisations. As early as the mid-1990s, Tommy Lundström and Filip Wijkström suggested that Swedish civil society was undergoing a shift “from voice to service.” Returning to the subject more recently, they note that it would have been equally justifiable to talk of a move “from member to volunteer and customer” or “from association to foundation and company” to describe the changes taking place in the sector in the 1990s and 2000s.

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470 Hartman 2011; Sivesind 2017; Svedberg & Olsson 2010.
471 Svedberg & Olsson 2010.
472 Here encompassing the fields of social care (elderly care, care of disabled people, care of families and individuals), childcare and education, but excluding healthcare.
476 Despite its (minor) decrease in relation to the public and for-profit sectors since the year 2000, however, there was a small real increase in nonprofit employees over the same time period: from 36,000 to 39,000 employees between 2000 and 2013. See Sivesind 2017, p.40.
479 Lundström & Wijkström 1995.
480 Lundström & Wijkström 2012, 248.
these changes have been felt across Swedish civil society, they have been particularly pronounced in the welfare sector.481

As noted, some scholars have interpreted these changes as signs that Sweden is moving away from the social democratic model of state-civil society relations, where the state was responsible for service delivery and civil society organisations were primarily concerned with serving and organising their members’ interests.482 Instead, it is said to have moved in the direction of the liberal order known from the Anglo-Saxon world, where civil society organisations are more likely to engage in charity work and provide a sizeable portion of public services in certain policy fields.483 It should be stressed, however, that the jury is still out on whether this is an accurate assessment of Swedish civil society’s trajectory since the 1990s, and, if so, what the implications of these changes have been for the affected organisations.484

Civil society organisations’ own interpretations of these events have differed. Whilst some organisations welcome the opportunity to compete for public contracts and actively lobby decision makers for better opportunities to do so, others have been less enthusiastic. The latter group includes organisations for whom the reduction in traditional grant forms has meant that they feel pressured to take on a service provision role, whether they want to or not. In past studies, civil society representatives have pointed out that Swedish civil society remains primarily populated with membership-based, volunteer-driven organisations, a relatively small proportion of which have the will or the ability to deliver public services. Moreover, among those that are willing to develop a capacity for service delivery, many lack the resources to do so at the level expected in contract requirements, leaving them unable to compete with larger, for-profit companies for public tenders.485

For some organisations, the increased reliance on public service contracts and conditional grants is seen to bring an unwelcome external interference. The perceived risk is that as organisations become reliant on funds tied to public contracts, they will be forced to shape their activities according to contract requirements, at the expense of their core pursuits or members’ priorities.486 In other words, civil society organisations striving to adapt to demands from

481 In a public commission on grant-giving to nonprofit organisations involved in social work conducted in the late 1990s, the author concluded that general organisational grants were unsuitable for this field and should be replaced with more regulated funding forms (SOU 1998:38, Vad får vi för pengarna? Resultatsäkring av statsbidrag till vissa organisationer inom det sociala området). This followed a series of other public commissions having made similar recommendations during the 1990s – e.g. SOU 1988:39 Mål och resultat: nya principer för det statliga stödet till föreningarnas liv, Statskontoret 1991:6, SOU 1993:71, Ds 1997:36; all summarised in SOU 1998:38.
484 Alongside the political rhetoric emphasising civil society’s ‘service’ function, which, as we have seen, has not translated into these organisations winning a substantial share of service contracts; the 2000s also saw a renewed interest in creating of new fora in which civil society organisations could exercise their ‘voice’ function – i.e. the developments in focus for this study. Gavelin 2011; Johansson & Johansson 2011, ‘Frivilligorganisationer och den lokala välfärdspolitik’, in Salonen, T. (ed) Hela Staden. Social hållbarhet eller desintegration? p.227-228.
485 Gavelin 2010; 2011; Nordfeldt 2012.
486 Gavelin, Kassman & Engel 2010; Söderholm & Wijkström 2002.
funders and auditors are said to risk compromising the values and qualities that set them apart from public and for-profit providers. This fear is not unfounded: a number of studies have highlighted the strong influence of business language and ideas on Swedish civil society organisations. They note that talk of “marketing” and “strengthening the brand” has become the norm in organisations that used to be defined by their grassroots orientation and internal democratic set-up. Hence, one interpretation of the effects that New Public Management-inspired reforms are having on civil society organisations is that they contribute to them becoming hybrid organisations, displaying traits traditionally associated with the public or private sectors. Another fear expressed by civil society representatives is that being reliant on public contracts undermines their organisations’ ability to provide an independent, critical voice in policy making, putting them at risk of being seen to ‘bite the hand that feeds them’. This is a concern that was also raised in this study, as will be discussed in chapters five and seven.

4.3 Civil society in policy making

The Swedish welfare model and the functions that civil society organisations perform within it have thus undergone a number of changes since the peak years of the so-called Swedish model. These developments have been accompanied by a series of attempts to reformulate and renegotiate civil society’s involvement in public decision making, which brings us back to the subject matter of this dissertation. Over the following pages, I briefly account for the key developments in this area leading up to and including the key policy developments in focus for this study.

As described in the introductory chapter, for much of the second half of the twentieth century, parts of what I refer to here as ‘civil society’ enjoyed regular and at times remarkably close access to decision makers. The mechanisms of these interactions ranged from organisations being represented on public decision-making boards and governmental commissions, to responding to remiss procedures, engaging in lobbying activities and maintaining informal contacts.

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489 Organisational hybridisation refers to when organisations operating in the same field adopt each other’s values and practices in order to improve results or satisfy demands from clients, funders or auditors. This can take many forms and tends to operate in more than one direction at once. One example is when the public sector imports business-inspired practices, such as streamlined production systems or standardised performance assessments. It then imposes these on service providers from all three sectors, who duly shape their activities accordingly and become all the more alike in the process. Another symptom of hybridity is an alleged reliance on professional staff among civil society organisations traditionally dominated by volunteers and members. See e.g. Hammar 2013; Lundåsen 2010b; Svedberg & Olsson 2010; Pestoff 2014. 'Hybridity, Co-production and Third Sector Social Services in Europe', American Behavioral Scientist.
with decision makers. These relations were central to the Swedish model being widely considered a neocorporatist system.491

A number of scholars have sought to make sense of this particularly close relationship between the Swedish public sector and civil society. Trägårdh notes that in contrast to the Anglo-American conception of state-civil society relations, where a large state and a thriving civil society are typically perceived of as mutually exclusive,492 in Sweden the two sectors have rarely been posed in opposition to each other.493 Rather, they have operated as two interconnected and mutually dependent components of Sweden’s particular model of popular democracy, which was founded on comparatively high levels of trust and relied on the active participation of organised interests in decision making.494 Indeed, some scholars have argued that during the second half of the twentieth century, the boundaries between the Swedish state and civil society became so blurred that at times it was difficult to tell them apart.495 As Bo Rothstein and Trägårdh point out, this was illustrated by how, during the second half of the twentieth century, “the Swedish word for ‘society’ (samhälle) was used to describe both ‘state’ and ‘(civil) society’”.496

This observation has prompted some scholars to reconsider the established conception of Sweden and its Nordic neighbours as highly state-centric, suggesting instead that they represent a uniquely “societal” system, characterised by the lack of a clear divide between the state and organised interests.497 In developing this argument, the sociologist Ronald Jepperson has suggested that what distinguishes the Nordic countries498 is not only this high degree of incorporation of external interests in state business, but also “a limited deference to hierarchy”, where “titles are functional rather than status-based”499 and policy making is framed by “an ideology of community consensus”.500 Following his analysis, the government in such a system is seen less as a sovereign agent than “an intermediary between the organised interests of society”, which includes civil society actors alongside political and business interests.501

Whether or not one fully accepts Jepperson’s analysis, it serves as a useful reminder that the state is not a unified actor. It is a highly complex apparatus

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494 Rothstein & Bergström 1999; Trägårdh 2007; Trägårdh 2010b.
495 Lundåsen 2010a: 49; Rothstein & Trägårdh 2007: 231.
498 Sweden, Denmark and Norway.
499 Jepperson 2002, p.73.
with innumerable branches, each balancing a range of evolving values and interests with conflicting pressures from their respective institutional environments.\textsuperscript{502} These are observations that, as we will see, have had implications for the studied reform, which affects public bodies of different types and at different levels of government.

From neo-corporatism to governance: change or continuity?

As noted, however, by the late twentieth century the relationship between the public sector and organised interests was changing, prompting observers to talk about a “fall of corporatism”.\textsuperscript{503} A key development here was the dismantling of public agencies’ decision-making boards, a process that began in the 1980s and culminated a decade or so later. In a study focusing on labour market policy, Bo Rothstein and Jonas Bergström traced this development back to public administration reforms carried out by the Social Democratic Government in the early 1980s. These reforms, which aimed to improve accountability in policy implementation, had the inadvertent effect of undermining the laymen boards that until then had played a central part in agency decision making.\textsuperscript{504} As a consequence, these institutions came to be seen as a less effective means of influencing decision making, prompting key members to resign. This had the eventual effect of laymen boards across government being dismantled and replaced with new fora for interest group involvement that held an advisory, rather than a decision-making function.\textsuperscript{505}

Yet these newer structures, too, have met criticisms, in particular for their continued tendency to privilege a particular type of organisation whilst keeping others effectively excluded from public policy making. Those granted the most access have remained large, federally structured or umbrella organisations purported to represent a significant portion of the electorate, such as labour or pensioners’ organisations, alongside professional lobbying organisations.\textsuperscript{506} Meanwhile, smaller, less formal associations and networks, or those representing minority interests, have had to work harder to gain visibility and access.\textsuperscript{507}

These observations and criticisms meant that the early years of the twenty-first century saw actors from both the public sector and civil society seeking to clarify and improve their relationship through a series of policy initiatives and lobbying efforts. A recurring theme in these activities was an emphasis on the

\textsuperscript{502} Pache & Santos 2010, p.459, 472.
\textsuperscript{503} Rothstein & Bergström 1999.
\textsuperscript{504} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{505} Hermansson et al. 1999; Lundberg 2014; Micheletti 1995; Rothstein & Bergström 1999. Examples in the Government Offices are pensionärsdelegationen, brukardelegationen and funktionshinderdelegationen; similar set-ups exist in public agencies and in local and regional government.
\textsuperscript{506} Johansson, Kassman & Scaramuzzino 2011, Staten och det civila samhällets organisationer i ett föreänderligt välfärdsförbund; Lundäsen 2010b.
\textsuperscript{507} SOU 2007:66.
need for more inclusive and discursive methods of interaction to replace, or complement, past practices.\textsuperscript{508}

Official documents where such ambitions have been declared include a public commission report on democracy (Demokratiutredningen), published in 2000.\textsuperscript{509} The report, which built on the findings of a number of sub-studies conducted by academics in Sweden and abroad, argued that Sweden’s model of representative democracy would benefit from the introduction of more participatory and deliberative elements.\textsuperscript{510} Its authors explicitly called for public bodies to look beyond traditional involvement methods and instead “adapt to the conditions under which citizens want to be involved”.\textsuperscript{511} As such, the report contrasted sharply with the firm commitment to the representative democratic model displayed in a previous commission on power and democracy that had been conducted a decade earlier.\textsuperscript{512} The Democracy Commission further suggested that the public sector ought to do more to acknowledge and support the full diversity of citizens’ associations active in Sweden, beyond the traditional popular movements. This was in part a response to the latter category of organisations having experienced, for some time, a decline in membership and member activity. This development was seen to undermine their ability to function as mobilisers of civic activity and representatives of special interests, making their privileged access to decision makers appear outdated and unfair.\textsuperscript{513}

Next, in 2001, the Social Democratic Government published a budget proposition where civil society issues were for the first time identified as a separate policy area.\textsuperscript{514} Among the aims of the new ‘popular movements policy’ (folkrörelsepolitiken) was the ambition to “develop, deepen and broaden democracy”.\textsuperscript{515}

In 2002, the Social Democratic Government launched a Democracy Bill (Demokrati för det nya seklet), containing proposals for how democracy could be strengthened in a context of declining voter turnout, changing citizen behaviour and an increasingly complex, multi-level decision-making climate.\textsuperscript{516} The bill, which drew in part on the Democracy Commission’s recommendations, explicitly sought to protect and deepen ‘popular rule’ (folkstyrelsen)\textsuperscript{517} and to develop the modes of collaboration and consultation between the state and a sector that at the time tended to be referred to primarily as ‘popular movements’

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item E.g. Prop.2001/02:80; SOU2000-1, p.198-209; SOU 2007:66, ch. 2.
\item SOU 2000:1. As explained in chapter three, public commission reports are official documents in the sense that they are initiated and published by government departments. However, the authors of the reports are autonomous and their findings and recommendations are seen as independent.
\item SOU 2000:1, p.243.
\item SOU 2000:1, p.156, my translation.
\item SOU 1990:44, Demokrati och makt i Sverige. Maktutredningens huvudrapport, ch.1.
\item SOU 2000:1, p.244-245. The alleged ‘crisis’ of the popular movements was acknowledged as early as the 1980s; see e.g. SOU 1987:33, p.95-100.
\item Rather than being spread over a number of different budget posts, as was previously the case. Prop. 2000/01:1 Budgetpropositionen för 2001.
\item Prop. 2000/01:1, p.188.
\item Prop. 2001/02:80.
\item Ibid., p.1
\end{enumerate}
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or ‘associational life’.

Its proposals included a number of suggestions on how direct citizen and service user involvement could be enabled at different levels of government. The bill also noted the need to provide popular movements and other types of citizens’ associations, including new, informal and loosely organised networks, with improved access to public decision making. One outcome of the bill was that a recurring popular movements’ forum (folkrörelseforum) was set up for this purpose.

In 2005, the Social Democratic Government charged a new independent commission with drawing up recommendations for the future direction of its social movement policy (Utredningen om den statliga folkrörelsepolitiken i framtiden). Among the recommendations that the commission presented in its final report in 2007 was the suggestion that yet another delegation should be set up as a platform for an improved and more egalitarian cross-sector ‘dialogue’ about issues affecting the voluntary sector. Another recommendation was that the Government should invite voluntary organisations to develop shared ‘rules of the game’ (spelregler) for the public sector–voluntary sector relationship. This idea was influenced by England’s ‘Compact’, a collaboration framework agreed by the UK Government and civil society organisations in 1998, which had inspired and become something of a benchmark for similar initiatives in other countries in the years since its launch. That Sweden should create a similar document had for some time been the focus of lobbying efforts by certain interests in Swedish civil society, led by the umbrella organisation Forum (Forum för idéburna organisationer med social inriktning).

Almost simultaneously with the launch of the popular movement commission’s final report, the newly elected Alliance Government responded to the sector’s lobbying efforts by initiating such a process. This was one of several steps taken by the Alliance parties to launch their new vision for Swedish civil society, marking their distance from the social democratic model of state-civil society relations.

The process to create an agreement began in September 2007 when two government departments invited approximately 80 civil society organisations to a ‘dialogue’ process aimed at identifying shared principles to guide the future relationship between the state and the ‘voluntary sector’ in the fields of health and social care. The process lasted just over a year and resulted in an agreement document signed by the Government, the Swedish Association of

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518 Ibid., p 33-34.
519 Ibid., p.66.
520 Dir. 2005:117.
522 Ibid., p.88-94.
524 The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Integration and Equality.
525 The specific policy areas in focus were: health care, medical care, social care, financial support for the sick and disabled and financial support for families and children.
526 U2008/2110/UF, Överenskommelsen mellan Regeringen, idéburna organisationer inom det sociala området och Sveriges Kommuner och Landsföreningar.
Local Authorities and around 40 organisations, including a number of national umbrella organisations. Again, the ambition to renew and strengthen the mechanisms of collaboration and consultation between the sectors was affirmed. One of the six principles around which the Agreement was structured set out the role and value of ‘dialogue’ for the relationship between the public sector and idea-based organisations.

When the Alliance Government published a Civil Society Bill (Politiken för det civila samhället) in 2009, ‘Dialogue and consultation’ (Dialog och samråd) was once more one of the chapter headings. Again, the Government affirmed its commitment to increase and develop the opportunities for civil society organisations, as they were now labelled, to influence decision making. As discussed, this change in terminology – from ‘popular movements’ to ‘voluntary sector’, to ‘idea-based organisations’, to ‘civil society’ – reflects at once how political visions for civil society shifted over this period and how related shifts took place in the way civil society organisations chose to define themselves.

Once again, a cross-sector forum (partsgemensamt forum) was set up to further this aim. A similar ‘dialogue’ principle reappeared when a second agreement was created a couple of years later, this time focusing on integration policy. Similar principles have been included in the majority of local- and regional-level agreements that have been created since. At the time of writing, 19 such local- or regional-level agreements exist. Alongside, and at times driving, these national developments were repeated calls from international organisations, local and regional government, academia and civil society organisations over the same period for a clearer, more transparent and more supportive relationship between the public sector and civil society. The civil society actors most vocally pursuing this goal were national-level umbrella organisations concerned with the rights and position of civil society as a sector, themselves a relatively new phenomenon in Sweden at the time.

Two parallel agendas dominated these negotiations. One was the demands by a group of voluntary organisations for more recognition of the role that the voluntary sector plays in Swedish society and for clearer guidelines on how the

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527 More organisations were to sign at later dates.
528 It should be emphasised, however, that these aspirations for clarifying the relationship between the public sector and civil society were not primarily born out of a concern for the latter’s involvement in decision making. Instead, as much, if not more, emphasis in discussions and texts was placed on the financial relationship between the sectors. In the Agreement, the Alliance Government makes its intentions clear by declaring that: “the Agreement shall clarify the voluntary actors’ role in the social sphere and enable them to compete on equal terms with other actors operating in this field” (IJ2008/2110/UF, p.5). For a discussion about the different motives that drove the Agreement process, see e.g. Johansson 2011 and Reuter 2012.
530 IJ2009/2235/UF, Överenskommelsen mellan regeringen, idéburna organisationer inom integrationsområdet och Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting.
532 E.g. the European Council, the European Union and the United Nations; see chapters five and six.
533 In the early 2000s, many local and regional authorities developed policies for the ‘social economy’, often in response to funding requirements from the European Union’s structural funds. From the mid-2000s, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions had a small team working to promote civil society involvement in local and regional decision making. See Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting 2006, Samspel med civilsamhället.
534 E.g. SOU 2000:1.
state and civil society should relate to each other. A key player driving this agenda was the umbrella organisation Forum (Forum för idéburna organisationer med social inriktning), representing voluntary organisations operating in the ‘social sphere’. Forum had spent several years in the early 2000s lobbying the Government to initiate a Swedish version of the English Compact.536

The other prominent agenda was pursued by a group of nonprofit health service providers seeking to raise awareness of their existence and of the challenges they faced on the competitive health and social services market. These organisations argued that public tendering and evaluation procedures ought to be adjusted to better accommodate their differences and thereby level the playing field between for-profit and nonprofit service providers. Leading this work was the umbrella organisation Famna, representing a group of nonprofit health and social care organisations. When the ‘dialogue’ about the Agreement started in 2007, these two agendas merged – though not, as previous studies have found, to everyone’s satisfaction.537

As will be explored in forthcoming chapters of this thesis, the attempts by the Swedish public sector and civil society actors to renew and reformulate their relationship continued in the years after the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill were published in 2008 and 2009.538 These developments mirror events in other countries539 and at European level,540 where civil society’s access to public decision making have been the subject of similar negotiations.

At a glance, the messages promoted in these initiatives appear largely consistent. A number of bodies within the public sector, at different levels of government, state their commitment to improving civil society organisations’ access to and ability to input into public decision making. The mechanisms through which this is to happen are typically referred to as ‘dialogue’ (dialog), ‘consultation’ (samråd), ‘collaboration’ (samverkan) and similar concepts. The Government’s pledges mirror demands for improved opportunities to influence decision makers made by parts of Swedish civil society over the same period.541

In both cases, language and ideas have been borrowed from other countries and

536 Gavelin 2010; Johansson 2011.
537 Ibid.
540 Initiatives to promote civil society involvement by the European institutions have included the European Council’s Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision Making Process, drawn up by civil society organisations from across Europe in 2009; and a number of policy documents by the European Union expressing an expectation that both member countries and the European Commission should involve civil society actors in decision making and policy implementation, including the EU’s 2020 strategy. Another example is the mentioned requirement by the European Social Fund that grant recipients should collaborate with civil society actors. See e.g. Council of Europe 2009, Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process; Gavelin 2011; Johansson, Kassman & Scar-amuzzino, 2011, p.34-37.
541 Gavelin 2010, 2011.
contexts. They broadly correspond with the trends described in the governance literature outlined in chapters one and two.

Yet a closer look at these events reveals that while the rhetoric within them has been largely consistent, much has been left unsaid. The terms used to describe the public sector-civil society relationship are at once normatively loaded and diffuse, making it difficult to establish what precisely is intended and, later on, whether ambitions have been achieved. Terms such as ‘dialogue’ are not defined, and what a ‘dialogue’ between the public sector and civil society may look like in practice is rarely elaborated on. Nor is it clear whether the emphasis on mechanisms such as ‘dialogue’, ‘consultation’ and ‘collaboration’ should be seen as a departure from, or rather a continuation of, the long and well-established Swedish tradition of civil society involvement in decision making. For whilst the repeated declarations in favour of more or better civil society involvement in decision making give the impression that a change of habits is underway, these, as we know, are not altogether new ideas in Sweden.

Studies of civil society involvement in Sweden in the 2000s

A number of scholars have already touched upon these questions. The political scientist Erik Lundberg has studied changes to civil society’s access to policy making in Sweden in the second half of the twentieth century, focusing on governmental commissions and the remiss procedure. He found that whilst the number and range of civil society organisations invited to respond to remiss procedures increased between the 1960s and 2000s, their relative share of access to these fora decreased in relation to that of state and for-profit actors. Moreover, although a larger number of organisations are invited by the public sector to contribute today, they are also more likely to abstain from participating compared to the 1960s. Lundberg found that in later years, civil society organisations appeared to see the remiss procedure and governmental commissions as less effective means of influencing policy. This could imply that the apparent opening of these fora to a larger and more diverse group of civil society actors has not led to a corresponding increase of influence for civil society as a group. As Lundberg writes: “There is increased access, but to a less relevant access point”.

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543 In this context, access is defined rather narrowly as occasions when the government invites civil society actors to participate in a remiss procedure. Other forms of influence and interaction are not included, nor are occasions when organisations that have not been invited respond to a consultation on their own initiative. Lundberg 2014, p.58.
544 The last data point is 2009.
546 Ibid., p.59.
influencing policy, such as building organisational legitimacy, strengthening their networks and allowing them to spread their messages in new places.547

In a later article, Lundberg together with political scientist Erik Hysing investigates the respective value of and relationship between two forms of state-civil society interaction: the Swedish model of governmental commission and so-called governance networks. They conclude that governmental commissions should not be dismissed as an outdated form of interest group involvement, but rather be recognised as a distinct type that remains relevant both as a policy tool and a source of learning for the development and evaluation of newer approaches.548 Thus, Hysing and Lundberg argue that governance networks and governmental commissions should not be viewed as a case of “the new replacing the old”, but rather as complementary options for public sector bodies seeking civil society input.549

In a study at Umeå University, David Feltenius and Jessika Wide tests the hypothesis that marketisation of public services leads to a marginalisation of organised interests, by studying how the marketisation of elderly care have impacted on the ability of pensioners’ organisations to influence decision making. Focusing on the existence and function of pensioners’ councils (pensionärsråd) at local government level, the researchers found that these remained prevalent and often highly active as elderly services were marketised. Thus little support was found for the hypothesis that marketisation undermines interest group influence. Instead, the authors point to a series of other conditions affecting the extent to which pensioners’ councils are able to contribute to decision making. These include politicians’ attitudes to the pensioners’ council, council members’ skills and engagement levels and the degree to which council members and local authority staff share the same views on the value of marketisation reforms.550

Other scholars have explored questions about civil society’s changing role in public decision making in specific reference to the national Agreement process.551 In one such study, Håkan Johansson, Anders Kassman and Roberto Scaramuzzino ask, among other things, whether the Agreement should be interpreted as another step in the deconstruction of Swedish corporatism, or rather as evidence of its revival.552 They suggest that the Agreement can be interpreted as an attempt to formalise relations between the public sector and the affected organisations to a higher degree than the policy-specific advisory committees and delegations that preceded it in fields such as pensioners’ policy and disabled policy. Yet they argue that the very fact that it is not policy-specific

547 Ibid., p. ch. 5.
548 Hysing & Lundberg 2016.
549 Ibid., p.33.
551 Johansson, Kassman & Scaramuzzino 2011, p.49.
calls its efficacy into question. Its focus is not actual health and social care policy, but rather how the public sector and civil society organisations should navigate their relationship in this field.\footnote{Johansson, Kassman & Scaramuzzino 2011, ch.6.} As such, its continued relevance will depend on how it is spread and implemented, and the authors question whether the right structures are in place for these processes to be successful.\footnote{Johansson, Kassman & Scaramuzzino 2011, ch.6 & 9.}

Political scientist Marta Reuter, too, points to the challenges of making what she deems a largely symbolic document practically useful.\footnote{Reuter 2012.} In an analysis of the Agreement text, she suggests that the document’s primary function has been normative and discursive rather than substantive. She interprets the Agreement as both a reflection of and an attempt to reconcile two opposing visions for civil society. On the one hand, there is the social democratic model, where civil society functions as mobiliser of civic activity and aggregator of special interests. On the other, there is the liberal tradition, where its role is seen as centred around charity work and service production. The Agreement process, she suggests, served as a discursive arena in which these two perspectives met in an attempt to redefine civil society’s roles and relations to the state. Reuter argues that by formally acknowledging the existence and needs of civil society organisations involved in public service provision, the Agreement served to legitimise these organisations’ presence in Sweden; hence it contributed to pushing the boundaries of how Swedish civil society is perceived – and perceives itself.\footnote{Reuter, Wijkström & von Essen 2012.}

Mairon Johansson at Linneaus University takes this argument a step further in her PhD dissertation, where she draws the conclusion that the primary function of the Agreement from the Alliance Government’s point of view was to legitimise its political ambition to increase the number of nonprofit providers of public services.\footnote{Johansson 2011, also Johansson & Johansson 2012, ‘From a liberal to a Social Democratic welfare state: the policy transfer of the UK Compact’, Nonprofit Policy Forum.} She suggests that the ‘dialogue’ process through which the Agreement was drawn up constituted an example of “formal co-optation” of civil society organisations by the Government in order to generate support for this goal.\footnote{Johansson 2011, p.201.}

The notion that the Agreement process constituted an at times awkward balancing act between the voice and service perspectives on civil society, has been echoed also in other analyses of these events.\footnote{E.g. Gavelin 2010; Johansson, Kassman & Scaramuzzino 2011; Nordfeldt 2012.} In the forthcoming chapters, I explore to what degree this tension is seen to have remained a feature of interactions between the public sector and affected civil society organisations in the years since its launch.

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This thesis’ contribution to Swedish civil society studies

This chapter has sought to demonstrate that my study is situated in a period when the nature, roles and relationships of Swedish civil society were being examined and renegotiated at several different levels. The perceived changes accounted for here are necessarily intertwined with broader socio-political developments in Sweden and abroad. The tensions between the voice and service factions of civil society, said to have so dominated the original Agreement process, may be understood as at once a reflection and a consequence of concurrent political, economic and administrative changes, with the ongoing restructuring of the Swedish welfare model in particular having impacted on the nature and functions of civil society organisations active in this field.

Yet whilst it appears clear that these developments have had an impact on the discourse on Swedish civil society’s place in decision-making processes, what their practical implications have been is less known. Nor do we know what effect they have had on how the Swedish public sector views and makes use of its interactions with civil society organisations. The remainder of this thesis seeks to shed light on what these effects may have been and why they came about, through an analysis of how the attempts to reform civil society involvement practices have been framed and interpreted by those affected by them.
The previous chapter provided a background and context to the events in focus for this study; namely, a series of attempts to reform civil society’s involvement in policy making in Sweden in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. The purpose of this chapter is to take a first step towards answering my first research question: **How can we understand the reform ideas’ appeal to instigators and target audiences?**

As I argue in chapter one, the studied reform attempts have potential wide-reaching implications both for the Swedish model of interest group involvement in representative democracy and for Swedish civil society’s function and status. Yet the reform’s purpose and practical implications have not been made clear. For this reason, I argue that it is important to examine what forces and actors have driven these developments, in whose interest they have been carried out, and how affected actors have interpreted their consequences. Here, I begin this process by means of an interpretive analysis of the way the reform was formally framed\(^{560}\) in policy texts and consultation responses, and how affected actors have interpreted its value. The subsequent spread of these ideas at the national and local levels of government, and how affected actors have experienced their impacts, are topics addressed in chapters six and seven.

The chapter is divided into four sections. In the first, I ask how the tradition of involving civil society in public decisions – whatever the form of involvement – was rationalised in policy texts, consultation responses by civil society organisations, and in interviews by affected actors. Why do public servants seek civil society’s input on decisions? How do civil society representatives rationalise their own interactions with policy makers? What are the principal gains of such activities in the eyes of those engaged in them?

I then turn to the attempts to reform involvement practices in focus for this study. Beginning with an analysis of how the reform ideas have been formally framed in texts, I ask what problems or issues were presented as underlying reasons for change, what other factors could be identified as having influenced the reform agenda, what solutions were offered and what the resulting policy proposals contained. Drawing on the constructivist institutionalist theories of organisational behaviour presented in chapter two, I examine whether the reform can be understood as a solution to some acknowledged problem or, rather, as a

\(^{560}\) By ‘framing’ I here refer to the processes by which the attempted reform has been articulated, justified and presented in texts. See e.g. Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings 2002; Hajer & Laws 2008; Sahlin & Wedlin 2008. See ch.3, **Analysis of policy texts and consultation responses** (fn) on why I have not conducted a full ‘frame analysis’ in the mode advocated by e.g. van Hulst & Yanow 2016; Yanow 2007.
“solution looking for a problem”. The other factors investigated are the use of ambiguity and symbolic language to widen the reform’s appeal, and the degree to which the reform has been interpreted as a call for radical or convergent changes to the traditional approaches to civil society involvement used in the Swedish public sector.

In the chapter’s third section, the findings from this exercise are complemented with an analysis of affected actors’ interpretations of and attitudes to the reform ideas.

The chapter ends with a discussion about how the formal framing of the reform can help us understand its appeal to instigators and target audiences. Here, I also return to the question of labelling introduced in chapter two: is this a reform, and, if so, what kind? My answer to this question is intended to contribute to ongoing discussions among governance scholars about whether governance reforms represent a change of direction for Sweden or should rather be understood as a continuation of its long and well-established tradition of interest-group involvement in public decision making.

5.1 Why involve civil society in decision making?

Formal rationales for civil society involvement

An underlying premise running through the analysed texts is that Swedish civil society organisations should have a voice in public decision making. Whilst the texts did not always provide detailed motivations for why this ought to be the case, that it should be so appears taken for granted. As a point of departure for this chapter, I thus start by looking at how this ‘involvement norm’ was formally rationalised in policy texts and civil society consultation responses. Broadly, the reasons for involving civil society in decision making provided there can be categorised as: benefits to democracy, benefits to decisions and outcomes and benefits to the public sector-civil society relationship. In the following, each of these themes is presented in turn.

Across the analysed documents, benefits to democracy were most frequently referred to. In the earlier official texts in particular, this was the only or primary reason for involving civil society that was explicitly articulated. Civil society involvement was presented as having both a direct and an indirect impact on democracy. The direct impact implied was that it was seen to provide fora for discussion and influence: democratic instruments that enabled those affected by decisions to contribute to their making. This can be exemplified by how the Commission Report emphasised the role that civil society organisations

562 This categorisation does not aspire to be either exact or exhaustive, but should be read as a simplified way of mapping the most common claims about the value of involving civil society in public decisions presented in the analysed texts.
play in connecting citizens, and particularly underrepresented groups, with political processes:

If associations are given better opportunities to participate in political processes they can empower groups that are currently underrepresented in society, which can serve to combat social exclusion.\(^{564}\)

This sentiment was echoed in consultation responses to the Commission Report\(^{565}\) and the Agreement\(^{566}\), where several civil society organisations stressed the importance of civil society’s voice function in ensuring a healthy democracy. It was pointed out that an independent and critical civil society was a necessary counterweight to political power, and that this function must be protected.\(^{567}\) The European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPM) summarised this argument as follows:

Voice-giving organisations play an important democratic role. We have an intrinsic value in that we represent individual citizens, often vulnerable groups and groups lacking in influence or other forms of representation. In that sense the organisations fill an important democratic function by evening out and strengthening the voices of the democratically weakest groups.\(^{568}\)

Thus, both public bodies and civil society organisations depicted civil society involvement in its different forms as a component part of democracy: a tool to be used alongside and to complement other decision-making mechanisms. As such, it was presented as serving an important democratic principle, namely that individuals and associations had a right to assert their interests in matters that affect them. This democratic right was often hinted at implicitly in the texts, and sometimes stated explicitly, such as under the ‘Dialogue’ principle in the Agreement:

All human beings are dependent on public decisions and services. From a rights perspective it is important that those who are affected by public decisions can assert their rights and interests by themselves or through their interest organisations.\(^{569}\)

Also present in the texts were references to the ways in which civil society involvement was seen to contribute indirectly to strengthening democracy. This included claims that these activities could at once boost and make visible the democratic functions that civil society organisations were seen to fill in society. These included that civil society organisations were said to stimulate their members’ values and interests, educate them in democratic processes, inspire

\(^{564}\) SOU 2007:66, p.35. This was a reiteration of the goals of the 2001 civil society policy, as outlined in the 2001 budget proposition (Prop. 2000/01:1). Note that all translations from Swedish to English in this thesis are my own unless otherwise stated.

\(^{565}\) Ananke 2008; Rädda Barnen 2008.


\(^{567}\) This argument also constitutes the core message of the principles of Autonomy and Independence in the Agreement and the Bill.

\(^{568}\) European Anti-Poverty Network 2008.

\(^{569}\) IJ2008/2110/UF, p.15.
debate, generate civic engagement, and contribute to reducing social exclusion.570

Another prominent theme, which became more emphasised in the later official documents,571 was that involving civil society in policy making was seen to bring benefits to decisions and outcomes.572 Underpinning these arguments was the assumption that broadening the input that went into public decisions could improve the outputs, leading to decisions that better served the people affected by them. Focusing on health and social care policy, the signatories of the Agreement observed in their joint statement that idea-based organisations operating in these arenas, by virtue of often having first-hand experience of health and social services, could contribute important insights that helped ensure that services better met users’ needs.573 The Civil Society Bill similarly stated that a key purpose of involving civil society organisations was to make better use of their knowledge and engagement in order to “broaden and deepen” the bases of public decision making.574 That civil society organisations held valuable perspectives and expertise that could benefit decision makers was stressed also in consultation responses by the organisations themselves.575

Another efficiency-related claim made in the official texts was that involving civil society in decision making could create buy-in for public decisions, thus reducing the risk of the finished plans or policies facing criticism or rejection.576 This last point links to the final category of benefits, which pertains to how involving civil society in decision making may benefit the public sector-civil society relationship. Here, it was in particular the more interactive, ‘dialogue’-based engagement methods that were portrayed as tools that may improve understanding, build trust between participants, and create a sense of shared responsibility and commonality between them.577 Such claims were made both as an argument for promoting ‘dialogue’ with civil society organisations and in references to the perceived impacts of past processes. The following two quotes, from the Agreement and the Agreement Report respectively, illustrate both types of statement:

Dialogue between the government and idea-based organisations intends to … create understanding and trust.578

The dialogue process is seen to have laid the ground for a new clarity of roles characterised by a higher degree of mutuality and participation.579

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571 The Agreement and the Civil Society Bill.
574 Prop. 2009/10:55, p.56.
576 IJ2008/2110/UF, p.20; Prop. 2009/10:55, p.75, 82-83. In the texts, the term used was “förankra beslut”, which can be translated as creating buy-in for decisions.
578 IJ2008/2110/UF, p.15.
The above categorisation of benefits primarily serves an analytic purpose here and is not purported to be clear-cut empirical categories. There is an inevitable overlap between them; gains for decision making could arguably be conceived of as also being of benefit to democracy, as could any measures that serve to improve the relationship between the public sector and civil society.

Moreover, each category accommodates benefits for different actor groups: civil society organisations (of different types and focus), public decision makers, specific service user groups and society at large. Between these supposed beneficiaries, too, there is overlap. For instance, giving civil society organisations more opportunities to influence public decision making was presented both as a way of improving social outcomes and of strengthening these organisations and their members/constituents.

The categorisation also serves to highlight differences in emphasis between different text sources. In the official texts, there was a slight shift in emphasis from an almost exclusive focus on the democratic benefits of civil society involvement in the early documents, to a bigger emphasis on efficiency-gains in the later documents. This can be read as an indication that a shift in government attitudes to civil society’s role took place in the years between their publications. Such a shift, if indeed there was one, might be attributed to changes in circumstances causing a shift in priorities, or to ideological differences between the Social Democratic Government that initiated the Popular Movement Commission, and the Alliance Government that instigated and launched the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill. To what extent such a shift did take place and, if so, what its causes might have been is difficult to assess based on a reading of these texts alone. Thus these questions are revisited below and in later chapters, where I explore interviewees’ observations of recent developments in public sector attitudes to civil society involvement.

Civil society organisations were slightly more likely to refer to an ambition to contribute specific knowledge to decision making than to strengthen democracy. Yet, as noted, these types of motivations can easily be conflated. This is exemplified by how many civil society organisations referred to their interactions with the public sector as “giving voice” to their members or interest groups – thus fusing the provision of policy-relevant information with a democratic purpose. Among these organisations, making specific reference to the democratic value of their policy work may have been seen as superfluous; it was simply a core purpose underlying everything they did.

**Motivations and gains reported by interviewees**

The previous section presented the formal rhetoric on civil society involvement in decision making, as articulated in official texts and civil society consultation responses. Over the following pages, I complement these formal justifications with a presentation of how actors from the public sector and civil society rationalised the involvement norm in interviews. Their responses included a mixture of arguments about why civil society involvement was seen as
important on principle, and reports of gains they claimed to have derived from past involvement activities.

The gains that affected actors reported largely overlapped with the claims made in texts about the potential benefits of civil society involvement and can broadly be seen to lend support to these. There were some differences in emphasis between texts and interviews, however; the most notable being that claims about the broader democratic benefits of civil society involvement were largely absent from interviews. Moreover, while there was considerable overlap between the motivations provided by civil society interviewees and respondents from the public sector, civil society representatives also offered a number of additional benefits that they claimed to gain from involvement activities. These are presented below, under the heading *Additional gains listed by civil society actors*.

When public servants were asked why they involved civil society organisations in their work, the most common reason given was to *tap into their knowledge* about a particular field or issue, in order to inform plans or decisions. Asked about the practical value of civil society’s input, one government civil servant illustrated this point by responding:

> Quality and knowledge. It gives us new knowledge and I think it raises the quality of decisions when we incorporate a lot of different perspectives in our work. Remiss responses are really important, but personal contacts give you a better understanding and perhaps more arguments for why people think the way they do.580

Others emphasised how civil society input provided a valuable source of *feedback on past or ongoing policy initiatives*. In the words of one public servant:

> You get insights about how people experience their everyday lives and the significant challenges they face. It becomes a kind of testimony [of how decisions have played out], which is useful to have alongside other follow-ups and reports that we work with.581

A few public servants mentioned that involving civil society organisations in a policy process was seen as a way to *avoid policy failure*.582 This point was made in reference to how a plan or proposal that was taken too far down the line to completion without being checked with relevant stakeholders risked rejection or failure on implementation; a potentially costly mistake that could cause significant delays to a policy process. Involving civil society in order to discover weaknesses in a proposal in time and to ensure buy-in for the final product were thus presented as important motivations. On a similar note, some public sector actors reported that they used civil society involvement as a strategy for averting

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580 Interviewee 57, state secretary, central government, 2016.
581 Interviewee 58, public servant, government department, 2016.
582 E.g. interviewees 05, 34, 35, 48, 56, 57, 65.
potential conflicts. One government public servant presented it as a way of protecting their seniors from uncomfortable clashes with organisations that, had they not been invited to contribute, might react negatively to a future decision or plan:

My task is to protect the Minister, and that involves conducting a transparent dialogue to avoid clashes. So initially I think I thought it was mainly about creating buy-in to protect the politicians (...) to avoid spiteful comment pieces in the media, organisations attacking government politicians, heated debates... to keep everyone calm through dialogue.

The same public servant conceded, however, that with experience they had found that these interactions also tended to deliver useful information, making it, in their words, “a win-win situation”.

Some actors from both sectors presented civil society involvement as a way of counterbalancing what was seen as a disproportionate media influence over political agenda setting. It was suggested that decision makers could use direct contacts with organisations that had long-standing experience of particular policy issues as a way to see past the topics currently dominating the media’s attentions. This could serve to broaden their perspectives and help identify the most pressing issues whilst simultaneously circumventing future conflicts resulting from imbalanced media coverage. With established relationships between civil society organisations and decision makers in place, it was suggested that the risk of media debates giving rise to conflict was reduced. In the words of one state secretary:

If you have close relationships and contacts and different organisations know about and understand the work you’re doing, it becomes more difficult [for them] to criticise you. So, of course, it’s in our interest to be on good terms with the affected actors. I think maybe more people are realising that now. With today’s fast-moving media and public debates and mob-society, it’s important to think about those things.

A further reason that public servants gave for turning to civil society was to gain access to their networks in order to reach and seek input from specific stakeholder groups. This reasoning was brought up particularly in reference to policy areas targeting vulnerable groups that were seen as difficult to identify or reach, or that might be reluctant to engage with public officials. In such cases, a civil society organisation working with the same groups could function as a valuable intermediary; trusted by both sides and thus able to facilitate contacts between them.

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583 Interviewee 56, public servant, government department, 2016.
584 E.g. Interviewees 6, 57, 65.
585 In Sweden, a state secretary is a politically appointed public servant; the most senior public servant in each government department.
586 Interviewee 57, state secretary, central government, 2016.
Another frequently mentioned motivation for involving civil society organisations was that these interactions were seen to improve understanding between the sectors.\textsuperscript{587} In this, the value of face-to-face interactions for gaining deeper insights into each other’s issues and drivers was emphasised, as illustrated by the following quote from a state secretary:

> We want to know their point of view and what their issues are, we want to be able to tell them what we’ve been thinking and what our motives are (…) we might not agree on everything but we might be able to understand each others’ roles and positions. For that the face-to-face meeting is pretty hard to beat.\textsuperscript{588}

Respondents from both sectors observed that the networking and relationship-building aspects of involvement activities often turned out to be more valuable than the specific inputs derived from them. They reported that repeatedly meeting the same organisations and individuals created a sense of familiarity, which facilitated future contacts and collaborations. From this perspective, it was the process of coming together across sectoral and organisational boundaries that made the biggest difference. The outputs of the process, whether it was an agreement document or input to some other policy product, were portrayed as of secondary importance. Some framed these observations in terms of trust, suggesting that the familiarity generated through regular interactions evolved over time into a more trusting relationship, which facilitated collaborative thinking and working.\textsuperscript{589} A few people made this observation in reference to the working structures put in place to create, disseminate and implement the Agreement, as exemplified by the following two quotes:

> It’s a side effect, which has turned out to be the most important. That’s what’s so strange. And it’s the immaterial aspects, the things we don’t measure. We always measure activities, but I’d say this is something different. There’s a whole different sense of security now in the system, in these networks. You can call anyone and everyone knows that we’re doing this together. Of course we are. There aren’t the same barriers that there used to be.\textsuperscript{590}

> There’s a trust-building process in there (…) You get to know each other. We’re so primitive and simple really. If you get to know someone you start to trust them, and then you start thinking together. And that’s what happened in the [dialogue] process with the Government when we created the Agreement, because we worked so close together. At least for some of us.\textsuperscript{591}

\textsuperscript{587} E.g. interviewees 02, 05, 07, 13, 30, 36, 43, 44, 52, 62, 72.

\textsuperscript{588} Interviewee 54, state secretary, central government, 2016.

\textsuperscript{589} E.g. interviewees 02, 07, 8, 14.

\textsuperscript{590} Interviewee 2, other, national level, 2016.

\textsuperscript{591} Interviewee 7, civil society representative, national level, 2016.
Where such new relationships had emerged, they were said to prove particularly useful when an urgent need for action arose. An example of this given in several interviews was when the unusually high numbers of refugees to Sweden in late 2015 had necessitated fast mobilisation of voluntary efforts.\textsuperscript{592} It was pointed out, however, that these types of benefits tended to be overlooked in the public sector. In the words of a public agency official:

You rarely pay attention to the processes, the things you do all the time: all these collaborative fora, all the dialogue and all these meetings you have that aren’t visible. All you see is a project or a report or an article. But it’s actually the process underneath that’s the most important, and it’s a shame that you can’t make it more visible somehow. Because that’s where the work is taking place; without it things really wouldn’t work so well. I see it as a precondition, and it requires a lot of time and resources to be done well.\textsuperscript{593}

This sentiment was echoed by others who expressed regret that it was difficult to put a value on the relationship-building benefits of civil society involvement. As expressed by one national-level actor who had been involved in both the creation and implementation of the Agreement:

You want to learn about building relationships and trust, but it doesn’t have the same status or the same dignity. How are you supposed to put a price on that? How are you supposed to budget for it?\textsuperscript{594}

These views on the relationship-building benefits of civil society involvement largely resonated with the claims made in texts. However, this was not a topic on which all the interviewed actors were in agreement. It was pointed out that a downside of these alleged benefits was that they tended to be limited to relatively small groups of individuals or organisations. Those who did not take part in the process in question, or whose views were at odds with the other participants, were less likely to experience the same feelings of trust or enjoy the benefits of new relationships. This theme is returned to in chapter seven, where I explore what affected actors identified as \textit{Remaining issues and challenges} in the implementation of the studied reform.

\textit{Additional motivations and gains listed by civil society actors}

The reasons that civil society actors gave for seeking access to policy making largely overlapped with those given by the public sector and are included in the summaries above. From a civil society perspective, these were presented as seeking to promote the issues and perspectives of their members or stakeholders – “giving voice” to their constituents – share knowledge that they felt could

\textsuperscript{592} E.g. interviewees 7, 14, 26, 52, 72.
\textsuperscript{593} Interviewee 61, public servant, national public agency, 2016.
\textsuperscript{594} Interviewee 2, other, national level, 2016.
benefit public services, and improve their working relations with decision makers. Alongside these motivations, however, civil society organisations listed a series of additional reasons for engaging with the public sector. One was a wish to raise awareness about their organisations’ work, in order to increase their chances of getting future funding and support, or to generate new collaborations.

In the context of the national and local agreements, civil society actors also spoke of a motivation to improve the working conditions for civil society at large. It was hoped that the agreements would make the public sector more conscious of civil society’s needs and challenges; that they would function as a blueprint for how relations could be made more transparent and formalised in future.

Another stated benefit of engaging with the public sector, again raised primarily in reference to the agreement processes, was that these activities offered civil society organisations opportunities to network with each other. This was said to give the organisations involved a better knowledge of and connections within their own sector. They served, in the words of one civil society representative, to create a shared sense of identity for the affected civil society organisations.595 One respondent from a civil society organisation in Uppsala commented on the effects of the local agreement process with the words:

The main benefits come from meeting up. Organisations that would likely never come into contact with each other meet around issues which they realise they have in common, even though they do different kinds of work, and they come up with solutions that can often be really interesting. It can be from a geographic point of view or related to some local issues or anything really – you meet up and things happen.596

For some civil society actors, relationship-building with other organisations and public servants was portrayed as an integral part of their organisational strategies; a necessary means to achieving their organisational goals.

Again, civil society actors were not uncritical in their reporting of these potential benefits of engaging with decision makers. Their reflections on how negative practices could impact on relations between and within the sectors are discussed further in chapter seven.

Summary of rationales for the involvement norm
This section has shown that text authors and other affected actors were largely unanimous on the standpoint that civil society organisations should have an input in public decision making. That this ought to be so is not questioned. This confirms the notion put forward in chapter four: that civil society involvement in

595 The expression used was “identitetsskapande”, which can be translated as identity-forming. Interviewee 18, civil society representative, national level, 2009.
596 Interviewee 45, civil society representative, local level, 2014.
some form can be considered an institutionalised part of decision making in the policy fields studied here.

There was also a level of agreement on the reasons why civil society involvement mattered. In the official rhetoric provided in texts, claims that it benefited democracy, could contribute to better decision making, and strengthened the public sector-civil society relationship were the dominant themes. Some differences in emphasis were evident, however, with the earlier documents focusing almost exclusively on democracy gains and relationship-building, and the later official documents placing more emphasis on efficacy gains: how civil society input could benefit decisions and outcomes.

The motivations for civil society involvement offered by affected actors in interviews, and the gains that they claimed to have derived from such activities, largely resonated with the formal arguments made in texts. A couple of discrepancies were found, however. One point of difference was that some public-sector officials listed pre-empting conflict and controversy as a central reason for involving civil society organisations in policy processes. In the formal rhetoric presented in texts, this was framed slightly differently: as creating buy-in for decisions.

It is also notable that references to broader democratic gains were largely absent from the interviews. With a few exceptions, the interviewed actors rarely spoke of civil society involvement as a democratic right or portrayed it as a means of fostering active citizenship. Instead, outcome-oriented motives linking involvement to benefits for the respondents’ own work tended to prevail. It is possible that this discrepancy can be explained by the democratic dimension of these activities being taken for granted by interviewees. As noted, attempting to differentiate gains for decisions and outcomes from gains for democracy may be misguided – some would argue that, in this context at least, the two are intrinsically linked. Another possibility is that the democratic value of civil society involvement and the democratic right of civil society actors to be heard are no longer considered as relevant as they once were. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this study to assess the veracity of this claim, it is nonetheless a discussion that merits attention and which therefore continues in chapter eight.

5.2 Why reform the modes of involvement?

One this chapter’s principal questions is why a reform of civil society involvement practices was considered necessary at the time when these policy developments took place. In this section, I examine how the need for reform was formally framed in official texts and civil society consultation responses.

The framing of a reform is the process by which a need for change is articulated, linked to possible solutions and presented to target audiences. As outlined in chapter two, such a process can be triggered by observed problems

597 E.g. interviewees 59, 62, 70.
that need addressing, such as organisational failings or crises in the surrounding environment.\textsuperscript{599} It may also be triggered by the influx of new ideas, values or practices; in other words, solutions presented without a problem being articulated first.\textsuperscript{600}

In the studied texts, identifying the reasons for a reform of involvement practices required some searching. It became evident that calls for a review of civil society involvement approaches had not emerged solely in response to a set of articulated problems. Rather, the texts made frequent references to how involvement methods ought to be modernised and improved, without any explicit references made to how existing methods were failing. The arguments given for reform can thus be broadly split into those that were primarily ‘problem-driven’ and those that appeared to be of the ‘solution-driven’ variety.\textsuperscript{601} In the following, I begin by listing four problems or issues that were presented in texts as justifications for reforming civil society involvement practices. Next I describe how imported ideas, promoted through formal steering efforts or unofficial institutional pressures, appeared to have contributed to shaping the reform agenda. This is followed by a synopsis of the solutions proposed in the analysed texts and the formal commitments that the Swedish Government made in connection to these.\textsuperscript{602} After a note on the symbolic value of the term ‘dialogue’ in the analysed texts, the section ends with a summary of the reform’s formal framing in texts. What the actors interviewed in this study thought of the reform ideas is addressed in section 5.3 below.

Presented problems

As noted, the analysed texts did not all make explicit references to any problems afflicting the public sector-civil society relationship that a reform of involvement practices could be seen to address. As discussed in chapter three, the texts differed in aim and genre and, consequently, addressed the issues seen to afflict the public sector-civil society relationship differently. For instance, both the \textit{Commission Report} and the \textit{Civil Society Bill} contained references to how social and economic developments were seen to have created a need for a review of the Government’s civil society policy.\textsuperscript{603} The \textit{Agreement} documentation,\textsuperscript{604} meanwhile, emphasised proposed improvements and was considerably more vague on any issues or problems that may have prompted its creation.\textsuperscript{605} And whilst some consultation submissions by civil society organisations presented issues that these saw as affecting their ability to contribute to public decision making, the remits of their contributions were limited by the consultation documents to which they were responding, and may

\textsuperscript{599} Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings 2002; Oliver 1992.
\textsuperscript{602} IJ2008/2110/UF; Prop. 2009/10:55.
\textsuperscript{603} SOU 2007:66, ch.2; Prop. 2009/10:55, p.82-83.
\textsuperscript{604} IJ2007/2539/D (the \textit{Decision}); IJ2008/2110/UF (the \textit{Agreement}); Skr. 2008/09:207 (the \textit{Report}).
\textsuperscript{605} However, some such information can be deduced from their introductions and general statements of aims.
therefore not provide a full picture of any issues they were experiencing. Nonetheless, four categories of problems could be identified in the analysed texts. These were: unequal access, poor mutual understanding, power asymmetry and complex policy challenges.

**Unequal access – past methods no longer fit for purpose**

A prevalent theme in the formal articulations of the reform ideas was that the established methods for involving civil society in decision making were seen to have inherent problems or no longer being fit for purpose. This point was made repeatedly in the Commission Report, which suggested that past attempts at involving civil society had tended to privilege established organisations while excluding less formal groups or organisations with fewer staff or resources.606

The commission also observed that the Government’s popular movements’ forum (folkrörelseforum) was seen by civil society participants as excessively steered by the Government,607 and that both this and other involvement activities all too often lacked a clear purpose or a meaningful link to decision making.608 The Civil Society Bill largely reiterated these findings. It quoted an internal Government study that had found significant variation between government departments in how they involved civil society in their work. Whereas the remiss procedure was standard practice across Government Offices, the extent to which these were complemented with alternative approaches, such as hearings or opportunities to discuss draft bills, varied greatly between them.609

Another recurring theme was the observation that Swedish civil society was changing and that the public sector had not updated its networks and working practices to accommodate these changes. These comments were primarily made with reference to a series of research studies that had found a decline of membership in the large popular movements, alongside a simultaneous growth in more informal organisational forms and informal volunteering activities.610

The new organisational forms were said to include informal networks and movements, sometimes small and ad hoc, sometimes larger and more stable, but typically devoid of the democratic set-up and membership structures that had characterised the Swedish voluntary sector in the past. These new and less formal organisational forms were said to pose challenges for public servants seeking to incorporate civil society perspectives in decision making. This was both because they were seen to be more difficult to keep track of and because the traditional ways of involving civil society, such as the remiss procedure and advisory boards, were geared towards formal organisations that conformed to

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607 Ibid., p.81, 83.
608 Ibid., p.82.
609 Prop. 2009/10:55, p.82-83.

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certain legal and democratic criteria.\textsuperscript{611} These new movements’ lack of formal
democratic and membership structures was also said to raise representational
issues, making it more difficult for public officials to know who to invite and
how to weigh and balance different actors’ input.\textsuperscript{612}

Both the Commission Report and the Civil Society Bill further made
reference to how civil society organisations at the time were said to be
demanding more or higher quality involvement in public affairs.\textsuperscript{613} In this they
referred to a study of old and new social movements in Sweden which had
found that newer organisations in particular were dissatisfied with the
opportunities for involvement and deliberation offered to them by the public
sector.\textsuperscript{614}

Consultation responses from civil society organisations provided further
details on the perceived failures of past involvement practices. In responses to
the Commission Report and the draft Agreement, several organisations repeated
the criticism that public sector consultation activities were seen as excluding and
non-transparent.\textsuperscript{615} And whilst a number of consultees called for more open and
inclusive forms of consultation and dialogue, it was also pointed out that simply
inviting more organisations would not necessarily lead to improved inclusivity.
A number of factors were said to impact on an organisation’s ability to take part
in public sector activities. These included having the resources to send
representatives to meetings, often in Stockholm and during office hours; having
the time and skills to engage with large amounts of often highly complex
material; and for attendees to be able to check these and any decisions to be
made back with their organisations’ boards and members in the timescales
required. Consultation responses suggested that public bodies often did not show
sufficient awareness of and sensitivity to these logistical obstacles in their
contacts with civil society organisations.\textsuperscript{616}

\textbf{Poor mutual understanding}

A related theme brought up in consultation responses was that many public
servants were seen to have a poor understanding of civil society’s composition,
functions and potential contributions. This knowledge gap was said to hamper
attempts by the public sector to make better use of civil society’s skills and
expertise.\textsuperscript{617} This was mentioned in particular with reference to how
organisations claimed to have been left out of consultation activities to which
they had expected an invitation, giving them the impression that public servants
did not have a good understanding of what organisations were active in their

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{611} For instance, a voluntary association (ideell förening) is set up by its members for a joint purpose unrelated to making
economic profit and is generally expected to have an internal democratic structure. To be legally defined as a voluntary
association it needs to have an internal charter that clarifies its nonprofit purpose.
\textsuperscript{612} E.g. SOU 2007:66, section 2.5. This topic was also raised in interviews and is discussed further in chapter seven.
\textsuperscript{614} Amnå 2006, quoted in SOU 2007:66, p.46.
\textsuperscript{615} CMR 2008; Forum för frivilligt socialt arbete 2008a; JOGTs juniorförbund 2008; Riksförbundet frivilliga samhällsar-
\textsuperscript{616} E.g. European Anti-Poverty Network 2008; RFSL 2008b; SKOOPI 2008.
\textsuperscript{617} E.g. Göteborgsregionens sociala ekonomi 2008; Kontaktnätet 2009; RFSL 2008b; Riksidrottsförbundet 2009.}
respective fields. It was further noted that many public servants only recognised two sectors in society, the public and the private, without acknowledging that civil society could be viewed as a separate, third sector, with its own unique qualities and potential contributions.

Whilst the topic of poor mutual understanding was not given more than a couple of mentions in the official texts, it was more frequently brought up in consultation responses. There, calls were made for public servants to be better educated about how civil society was organised, what challenges its organisations faced in interactions with the public sector and what potential value the sector could contribute to decisions and services. These arguments were sometimes linked to a discussion taking place at the time about the need for more comprehensive research, and in particular better statistics, about Swedish civil society.

**Power asymmetry**

Yet another issue raised in the texts was the notion that the fundamental inequality of power and resources between the public sector and civil society was not seen to be sufficiently acknowledged or addressed by public bodies. This theme, too, was particularly prevalent in consultation submissions. Roks, the National Organisation for Women’s Shelters and Young Women’s Shelters in Sweden, made the following point in a written response to the draft Agreement:

> …a dialogue between idea-based organisations and central or local government [can never] be conducted on equal terms. There is a clear power relationship between them, in which the organisations will always be in a subordinate position. This does not need to be an obstacle to dialogue or collaboration, but it needs to be acknowledged and discussed.

The perceived problem was not only that a lack of resources restricted many organisations’ ability to take part in public sector consultations, as noted above, but also that the Government controlled the design and agenda of consultation activities to what some felt was an unjustified extent. Further complicating matters was the fact that many civil society organisations found themselves financially dependent on the public bodies seeking their input. This was on account of the body running the involvement process also being responsible for distributing organisational grants or commissioning service contracts. In consultation responses, civil society organisations pointed out that such a set-up

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618 Svenskt Friluftsliv 2008; Verdandi 2008; SLAN 2008b.
619 RFS 2008. The perception that the civil society-public sector relationship had been negatively affected by public servants’ poor understanding of civil society was also repeatedly raised in interviews and is discussed further below and in chapter seven. The blame was not put solely on the public sector, however. A few of the interviewed actors noted that civil society organisations, too, sometimes lack a good understanding of how the public sector worked, something that was presented as a hindrance to effective interactions between them.
620 E.g. Civos 2009; Forum för frivilligt social arbete 2008a; Roks 2009.
622 Roks 2008a, 2008b.
could compromise the organisations’ ability to freely speak their mind in consultations and collaborations. This topic was also discussed at length during the Agreement process and resulted in specific principles on Autonomy and independence being included in both the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill.  

Complex policy challenges

Another reason for reform mentioned in the texts was the notion that decision makers were said to be faced with increasingly complex social and political problems and ever more intricate, multi-level decision-making practices, making them more reliant on the help of external expertise, including from civil society organisations, to navigate these challenges. An example is how The Civil Society Bill stated that the internationalisation of policy making, combined with a speeding up of administrative processes, had contributed to making public decision making at once more complex and further removed from ordinary citizens. In this context, involving civil society organisations in consultation or ‘dialogue’ was presented as an increasingly important way to bridge the gap between citizens and decision makers:

The pace and the complexity of law making and decision making is increasing, as a result of the influence that the EU and other international organisations are having on national politics. The internationalisation and the increased pace and complexity has in some aspects increased the distance between individuals and decision making. Organisations in civil society can play an important role as channels for the exchange of information and views between public bodies and individuals, as well as provide expertise and experiences pertaining to different social groups’ needs and interests.

This topic was not particularly prevalent in the official texts, however, and only appeared in one consultation response. In their response to the Social Movement Commission Report, Swedish Save the Children noted that the challenges facing the Swedish model were not merely economic but related to “fundamental questions about the division of responsibility and constitutional questions about the distribution of power at different levels of society.”

Imported ideas

Alongside the problems listed as afflicting the public sector-civil society relationship, both formal policy texts and civil society consultation responses contained a number of references to other sources of inspiration for change. As
will be explored below, they also contained numerous examples of improvements promoted without reference to how existing practices were seen to be failing. In this sense, the reform agenda can be described as, to some degree, exemplifying the phenomenon of “solutions looking for a problem” described in the constructivist institutionalist literature and discussed in chapter two.629 Following the theoretical framework, I distinguish here between informal and formal institutional pressures pertaining to the need to reform civil society involvement practices.630

Informal pressures: awareness of alternative ways of working
Evidence of how informal institutional pressures appeared to have informed the reform agenda include mentions of how working practices from other countries and contexts were being promoted as new options for civil society involvement in public decision making in Sweden. The most notable example of this was the numerous references to how the English Compact had been used as inspiration for the Swedish Agreement. The Compact was first mentioned in the Commission Report as a source of inspiration for the “rules of the game” (spelregler) that it proposed should be instigated to guide public sector-civil society relations.631 As outlined in chapter four, by the time the Commission Report was published, the first national Agreement process had already been set in motion. Mentions of the Compact appeared again in the Agreement Report, which outlined the English document’s role as inspiration for the Agreement.632 It is noteworthy that several Swedish delegations, from both the public sector and civil society, travelled to England in the years leading up to these events to learn about its experience with the Compact.633

Formal steering from international institutions
Another example of how external practices and demands contributed to the reform agenda were frequent references in the texts to how international institutions worked with or called upon their members to work with civil society organisations in agenda-setting, decision making and project delivery. Particularly prevalent were references to the European Union and the European Council, which were found in both official texts and consultation responses.634 The UN was also mentioned in a couple of places as providing models and incentives for civil society involvement in public policy.635

In the official texts, the international influences over this agenda were visible among other places in the Instruction to the Popular Movement Commission, which highlighted how Sweden’s entry into the EU had given “voluntary organisations a more formal role in the partnerships that exist within the

European structural funds. The Civil Society Bill contained a section on the history and status of nongovernmental organisations in the international arena, including an overview of civil society’s opportunities for influencing intergovernmental organisations. The Bill noted that most intergovernmental bodies had institutionalised mechanisms for consulting with civil society, including processes for involving them in international conferences. It further observed that there were few examples of these intergovernmental bodies making explicit recommendations to national governments on how they should involve civil society in decision making. Only one such example was quoted in the text, a recommendation by the European Council from 2007 which stated that:

Governmental and quasi-governmental mechanisms at all levels should ensure the effective participation of NGOs without discrimination in dialogue and consultation on public policy objectives and decisions. Such participation should ensure the free expression of the diversity of people’s opinions as to the functioning of society. (…) NGOs should be consulted during the drafting of primary and secondary legislation which affects their status, financing or spheres of operation.

This recommendation later contributed to the European Council tasking the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations of the Council of Europé (INGO) with drafting a code for how member states should involve civil society organisations in decision making. The resulting Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision Making Process was accepted by the European Council in 2009.

Where civil society submissions made reference to international discourses on civil society involvement, it was sometimes in the context of calling for these to be more explicitly discussed in the official policy texts. There were also calls for the Government to acknowledge the work that Swedish civil society organisations already carried out internationally, such as through lobbying networks at the European level and beyond. A couple of organisations further called on Sweden to do more to comply with the EU’s and the European Council’s recommendations for increased civil society involvement. It was also suggested that the Swedish Government should strive to be a model for other countries by showcasing its work in this area and working to raise the profile of civil society internationally.

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636 Dir. 2005:117. The subsequent Popular Movement Commission Report does not address this theme, however, with the exception of a comparison of how Swedish civil society compares with other countries in terms of funding and social contributions. See SOU 2007:66, p.47-51.
640 Ersta Sköndal högskola 2009; RFSL 2008b.
641 Coompanion 2008; RFSL 2008b.
642 Coompanion 2008; Svenska kyrkan 2008b.
643 RFSL 2008b.
Proposed solutions

Both official texts and consultation responses included suggestions for how civil society’s involvement in decision making could be improved. In the following, their suggestions are summarised under the headings: How to involve civil society?; What issues require civil society involvement?; When ought involvement to take place?; and Who should be involved?

How to involve civil society? What does good involvement entail?

Suggestions about how the modes of involvement could be improved were primarily general, not so much proposing specific methods as listing characteristics and ingredients that such activities should strive for. A strong theme running through the analysed texts was the notion that any attempt to engage civil society ought to be characterised by a sense of reciprocity, mutual respect and equality. That participants from the public sector and civil society should have a more equal standing in their interactions than had previously been the case was frequently repeated. Such requests can be found among other places in civil society responses to the Popular Movement Commission’s recommendation that a new popular movements’ delegation (folkrörelsedelegation) should be initiated. The proposal was criticised for placing too much control over the delegation’s composition and direction in the hands of the Government Offices. Instead, consultees suggested that chairmanship of the delegation should rotate between representatives from the two sectors and that civil society organisations themselves should decide which organisations should represent them. Similar views were voiced during the Agreement process and in consultation responses to the draft Agreement and Bill, and were subsequently incorporated into the ‘Dialogue’ principles in both documents. The Civil Society Bill recommended that:

…dialogue and consultation between the government and civil society should be designed so that relations between the parties are equal.

Related to these calls for a closer and clearer relationship between the sectors was the recognition that any improvements in this area would require a better mutual understanding between them.

More specific indications about what ingredients a “good” involvement process should contain are primarily found in descriptions of specific initiatives and in the Government’s commitments under the ‘Dialogue’ principles in the

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644 These descriptive headings are commonly used in the governance and deliberative democracy literatures. See e.g. Jacobsson, Pierre & Sundström 2015, p.51-53.
645 CMR 2008; Forum för frivilligt socialt arbete 2008a; RFS 2008; RFSL 2008a; Svenskt Friluftsliv 2008a.
647 Riksidrottsförbundet 2009; Roks 2008a, 2008b.
648 Prop. 2009/10:55, p.79. Following the recommendation in the Commission Report, the Civil Society Bill further proposes that a cross-sector forum (partigemensamt forum) be instigated to serve as the principal setting for central Government-level ‘dialogue’ about civil society-specific issues. Taking into account some of the criticisms made against the original proposal by civil society consultees, the Bill states that the new forum should consist of representatives from the public sector and civil society organisations, have a rotating chairmanship, and address topics raised by both parties. See Prop. 2009/10:55, p.76.
Agreement and the Bill. From these sections, it can be inferred that a good involvement process was typically seen to involve meetings of some form. Terms such as “dialogue meeting”, “meeting place”, “hearing” and “conference” occur frequently in reference to processes completed or planned, indicating that written consultations alone was no longer considered sufficient. Indeed, the Civil Society Bill explicitly recommended that all government departments should strive to complement the remiss procedure with extended and more interactive forms of engagement.649

Among other ingredients of good quality involvement referred to in the texts, the term “exchanges” (utbyte) frequently recurs. Exchanging knowledge, experiences and viewpoints was portrayed as a key component and perhaps a defining purpose of involving civil society in decision making.650

Two related ingredients that recurred were “discussion” and “negotiation” (diskussion, förhandling). Terms such as “negotiating party”, “negotiation process”, and “negotiation phase” are used in the texts, portraying public sector-civil society interactions as settings where different perspectives and needs meet and may require some effort to be consolidated.651

Other components of good involvement referred to were feedback and anchoring. There were calls for more time to be built into involvement processes to allow civil society participants to check issues with their colleagues and members before deciding on a position. It was also suggested that public bodies initiating involvement activities ought to keep participating organisations informed about process outcomes.652

Lastly, and in reference to the proposed introduction of a cross-sector forum (partsgemensamt forum) to host continuous ‘dialogue’ between the public sector and civil society, the Civil Society Bill added that such initiatives must have a clear purpose and be linked to real opportunities for civil society organisations to have an influence. These factors were said to have been missing from similar fora in the past.653 Yet the idea that involvement should be linked to influence – the ability to have an actual impact on decisions or services – was only rarely explicitly stated. The Agreement or the Civil Society Bill did not spell out that ‘dialogue’ should be linked to influence, with the exception of a note in the latter stating that issues discussed in the cross-sector forum should be of a strategic nature and offer civil society organisations the ability to exert “real influence” (reellt inflytande).654 Influence was not mentioned in the goals and commitments set out in connection with the ‘Dialogue’ principles. When the concept of influence did appear, it was in broader references to civil society organisations’ democratic functions, where they were portrayed as a channel

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652 References to feedback and anchoring were particularly prevalent in descriptions of the completed Agreement process in the Agreement Report and the Civil Society Bill. Here it was suggested that the fact that the timeframes and structure of this process allowed for discussions of outcomes and draft plans to be fed back to the participating organisations, political parties and other stakeholders lent legitimacy to proceedings and gave the resulting Agreement a broader support base. See e.g. Skr. 2008/09:207, p.17, 27. As noted, not all participants shared this assessment of the process.
654 Ibid.
through which citizens could influence decision making and democratic processes.\textsuperscript{655} When the practicalities of civil society’s involvement in decision making was discussed in the texts, it was instead framed as the public sector acknowledging their “right to be heard”\textsuperscript{656} or the organisations “asserting their interests”.\textsuperscript{657}

In general, the analysed texts were vague on what distinguished the proposed improvements to civil society involvement practice from traditional approaches. In the \textit{Popular Movement Commission Report}, the \textit{Agreement} and the \textit{Report on the Agreement}, ‘dialogue’ appeared to be used as an umbrella term for any mode of civil society involvement in decision making, with no clear demarcation made between past and new approaches.\textsuperscript{658} Only the \textit{Civil Society Bill} differed in that it provided some clues as to how ‘dialogue’ or “expanded consultation” (\textit{utökat samråd}) were seen to be different from the traditional remiss procedure. Under the ‘Dialogue principle’, the \textit{Bill} recommended that instances of ‘expanded consultation’ should become a more frequent feature of government decision making:

\begin{quote}
The Government suggests that the remiss procedure frequently could and should be complemented with information and views being gathered from civil society organisations during more stages of a planning/preparation process and in more ways, e.g. through hearings or written comments on drafts and similar. The creation of this Bill is an example of such an extended consultation.\textsuperscript{659}
\end{quote}

In this extract and elsewhere\textsuperscript{660} in the document were thus clues as to how ‘dialogue’ and expanded consultation were seen to differ from conventional written consultations. The distinguishing factors can be summarised as: the \textit{methods} being different (typically, some form of face-to-face interaction was to be involved); processes were to be more \textit{open} (more civil society organisations should be invited to take part); and the \textit{timing} and \textit{frequency} ought to be different (organisations should be asked to give input at an earlier stage in proceedings, or more than once).

\textbf{What issues require civil society involvement?}

Authors of policy texts and consultation responses made few references to specific policy issues that may benefit from civil society input, or to what types of issues, if any, were not suitable. This lack of specificity is understandable given the broad remit of the texts. The clause set out in the \textit{Agreement} that ‘dialogue’ must be adaptable to local and regional circumstances\textsuperscript{661} confirmed this by stating that it was not the task of central Government to decide what

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\textsuperscript{655} Ibid, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{656} IJ2008/2110/UF, p. 20; Prop. 2009/10:55, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{657} IJ2008/2110/UF, p. 15; Prop. 2009/10:55, p. 56.
\textsuperscript{658} With the exception of the Government’s commitment to keep civil society organisations more informed of relevant commissions and consultations to which they may want to give input, which falls under the ‘Transparency’ principle.
\textsuperscript{659} IJ2008/2110/UF, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{660} Prop. 2009/10:55, p. 57. The last point makes reference to how a draft of the \textit{Bill} was circulated to civil society organisations for comments.
\textsuperscript{661} IJ2008/2110/UF, p. 15.
issues might require civil society input at other levels of government. This must
instead be decided on by the relevant agency and, where appropriate, their
stakeholders. The latter notion was affirmed by a few consultation responses that
reiterated the need for civil society organisations to contribute to setting the
agenda in interactions with the public sector. 662 Occasional mentions of specific
topics for involvement can be found, however, such as when the Agreement
referred to the requirement in the Social Services Act that local social services
should engage civil society organisations in their planning and outreach work.663

The Civil Society Bill did not provide more clarity on suitable subject matters
or boundaries for civil society input, except when declaring that planning and
decision processes in “all fields” of government stood to benefit from civil
society input. 664 It further suggested that beyond involving civil society
organisations in their respective fields of expertise, it was necessary to engage
them in broad and ongoing ‘dialogue’ about civil society-wide issues. This
included, but was not limited to, the nature and dynamics of their relationship
with the public sector. Thus the Government proposed that civil society
organisations should be engaged in ‘dialogue’ about the implementation of the
Civil Society Bill and its principles, about how civil society’s democratic
function could be strengthened, and about other issues relating to civil society’s
position in Swedish society, to be addressed as they arose.665

When ought involvement to take place?
The question of what stages in a policy process would be more or less suitable
for civil society input was also not addressed in any depth in the analysed texts.
The exceptions were a few comments on how civil society could make a
valuable contribution at the earlier stages of a policy process. One example was
a paragraph in the Civil Society Bill where ‘dialogue’ or ‘expanded consultation’
were set apart from the traditional remiss procedure model, precisely by the fact
that they could occur “during more stages of the planning process and in
different ways”.666

Thus it appears that timing was one of the factors that distinguished the
Government’s new aspirations for civil society ‘dialogue’ from traditional
consultations, although precisely what the correct timing should be was not
elaborated on in any detail. Frequency, too, was emphasised. That public sector-
civil society ‘dialogue’ should be approached as an ongoing endeavour rather
than one-off events was underlined in official texts and consultation responses
alike, with terms such as “regular” (regelbunden), “recurring” (återkommande),
“continuous” (kontinuerlig) and “open-ended” (låpande) making appearances.667

662 E.g. CMR 2008; Forum för frivilligt socialt arbete 2008a.
665 Ibid., p.81
666 Ibid., p.57.
667 E.g. CMR 2008; IJ2008/2110/UF, p.15,19; Prop. 2009/10:55, p.57, 76-83; SIOS 2008; SOU 2007:66, p.84; Svenska
kyrkan 2008a.
Who should be involved?

As noted, the analysed texts contained numerous references to how past consultation activities had been considered insufficiently inclusive and often appeared closed to external input or scrutiny. Noting that in particular smaller and informal associations had tended to be excluded from past involvement initiatives, the Commission Report suggested that targeting these groups in the future could both benefit policy making and stimulate civic engagement:

A broad dialogue and collaboration with such associations is vital. [The Democracy Commission] stressed that small, new, unconventional, sometimes loosely organised associations also need to be given the opportunity to participate. Such groups can give complementing information about new social needs and how they can be catered for. Drawing on their capacities may encourage more people to participate.  

That future developments in this area should strive towards improved transparency and inclusivity was thus a central message in official texts and consultation responses alike. Some civil society consultees pointed out that since public servants often lacked up-to-date information about which organisations were active in their fields, it should be up to the organisations themselves to nominate or appoint their representatives in ongoing discussion fora. Both the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill emphasised that the aspirations outlined under the ‘Dialogue’ principles constituted a departure from the past tradition of limiting invitations to consultations or commissions to select groups of civil society representatives.

Formal commitments

The suggested improvements outlined above were lacking in specificity and prescriptive measures. More detail on the Government’s intentions for the involvement agenda can be found in the commitments and measures listed in the Agreement and the Bill.

The Agreement, firstly, contained a list of commitments (åtaganden) and measures (åtgärder) that were intended to guide the Government’s implementation of its ‘Dialogue’ principle. Here, the Government committed to: develop new fora for a systematic exchange of experiences between the sectors; keep civil society organisations informed of relevant processes in the fields of health and social care; and ensure that collaborations between civil society organisations and social services were further developed. The Government further set out a number of measures to be taken towards

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670 This argument was made by a number of consultees in response to the Popular Movement Commission’s proposal for a new cross-sector forum (partsgemensamt forum). See e.g. CMR 2008; Forum för frivilligt socialt arbete 2008a.
these goals. These were: exploring the possibility of using existing delegations or similar for the systematic exchange of experiences between the sectors and possibly extending the voluntary sector’s involvement; investigate which processes in Government Offices and other authorities the voluntary sector should be kept informed about; continually invite the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions to take part in meetings between the Government and the voluntary sector; observe the importance of hearing the voluntary sector’s views in public commissions and, where relevant, stress the importance of voluntary sector involvement in instructions to new commissions; promote national meetings with idea-based organisations for joint discussions about their circumstances; develop the exchange of information in dialogue with idea-based organisations in order to create better informed decisions; give the County Administrative Boards (länsstyrelserna) the task of monitoring how local authorities complied with the Social Services Act clause that social services ought to collaborate with civil society.673

Under the ‘Transparency’ principle, the Government committed to, among other things: embrace and be open to the different forms that the idea-based organisations took; ensure that the public was given objective and relevant information about the idea-based organisations’ contributions; offer idea-based organisations opportunities to influence by giving their views on issues that concerned them; and to a greater extent inform them of ongoing commissions where they might be able to contribute.674

Again, these writings were characterised by a notable lack of specificity. Verbs such as “explore” (undersöka), “observe” (uppmärksamma), “promote” (främja), and “develop” (utveckla) dominated the lists of pledges and measures, with little information given on what this might mean in practice or how the Government would know if its goals had been met.675

The Civil Society Bill contained a few more hints on how the Government expected its ‘Dialogue’ principle to be applied in practice. This took the form of a list of factors that would indicate if the ‘Dialogue’ principle had been observed, namely the extent to which:

- civil society organisations were included in regular remiss procedures
- civil society organisations were given the opportunity to contribute information and views beyond the regular remiss procedures, in connection with government preparation of policy matters
- other public authorities engaged in dialogue with civil society organisations, and

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673 DJ2008/2110/UF, p.20.
674 DJ2008/2110/UF, p.22.
675 The seventh measure listed under the ‘dialogue’ principle was an exemption, specifying that the County Administrative Boards (länsstyrelserna) would be charged with following up on how local social services comply with the Social Services Act clause that social services are required to collaborate with civil society.
open meetings and consultations were held with civil society organisations in order to jointly discuss general questions about civil society’s circumstances. Here, in the first bullet point, the Civil Society Bill appeared to suggest that the regular remiss procedure constituted one aspect of public sector-civil society ‘dialogue’. Yet the inclusion of additional indicators, such as whether civil society organisations were given the opportunity to provide information and views outside of the traditional remiss procedure, indicated that written consultations alone would not be enough to meet the ambitions of the ‘Dialogue’ principle. The Bill further recommended that the Ministry of Integration and Equality (Integrations- och jämställdhetsdepartementet) should conduct a trial of “expanded consultation” to complement the traditional remiss procedure.

**The symbolic (and other) meanings of ‘dialogue’**

As discussed in chapters two and three, policy texts tend to make frequent use of symbols: terms and labels that represent particular values, phenomena, or intentions. A characteristic of policy symbols is that they accommodate multiple meanings, implying that, in the words of Dvora Yanow, two implementers of the same policy “may each be implementing something different”. From this follows that the more people are affected by a policy proposal, “the greater the potential for varying interpretations”. The term ‘dialogue’ (dialog) can be seen to fill such a symbolic function in the policy developments analysed here. In both the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill the term was used as a heading for the Government’s ambitions for the future direction of civil society involvement in decision making. Studying these writings about ‘dialogue’ thus provides clues to what their authors saw as the ingredients and characteristics of a good involvement process. Yet the term was also applied in other ways, spanning from the broad to the specific. In the following, I briefly outline what different usages appeared in the formal framings of the reform ideas in policy texts and consultation responses.

The most widespread usage of ‘dialogue’ in this context was when it was used as an umbrella term for almost any enduring interaction between civil society organisations and the public sector, irrespective of method or content. This broad and unspecific meaning of ‘dialogue’ was how the term appeared in the Commission Report, in reference to the discontinued Folkrörelseforum and the proposed new Folkrörelsedelegation: two fora for ongoing ‘dialogue’ between the sectors. Civil society organisations also almost exclusively applied this broader, unspecific meaning when the term ‘dialogue’ appeared in consultation responses.

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679 Ibid.
In the Agreement and the Bill, this broad definition of ‘dialogue’ gained an additional, aspirational and distinctly normative connotation. This was when ‘dialogue’ became the title for the principles that set out the Government’s intentions for future civil society involvement in decision making. The ‘Dialogue’ principle appeared first in the Agreement, as one of the signatories’ six principles on how they should relate to each other in the fields of health and social care. It was subsequently reapplied in The Bill, where it was extended to all policy areas affecting civil society.

The phrasing of the original ‘Dialogue’ principle from the Agreement gave little guidance on what public sector-civil society ‘dialogue’ might entail in practice, although some hints about its perceived value and desired characteristics were offered. A clue to the reason behind this reluctance to define ‘dialogue’ more precisely can be found in a clause at the end, which stated that the forms that ‘dialogue’ takes must be adaptable to local and regional circumstances. From this we can assume that providing a more precise definition of the term was not considered desirable, as doing so would risk making the principle too prescriptive to be rolled out across the Government Offices and to local and regional levels, where traditions and needs differ. This, then, is one way in which the multi-level, cross-sector settings in which the reform was created and disseminated appear to have impacted on how it was framed.

When the original ‘Dialogue’ principle was lifted from the policy-specific Agreement to the government-wide Civil Society Bill, it retained much of the same content, albeit with slightly more clarity given on how it was seen to represent a stepping up of aspirations from traditional consultation models, as outlined above.

The third and least common usage of the term ‘dialogue’ in the texts can be labelled narrow and practice-oriented. This refers to when it was used as a label for a specific type of interaction between the public sector and civil society; a tool that could be distinguished from other approaches to involving civil society organisations in decision making. This usage of the term appeared most often in reference to specific initiatives, such as the ‘dialogue’ processes initiated to write agreements between the Government and civil society organisations in different policy arenas.

The distinction between ‘dialogue’ as a broad and unspecific term, as an aspirational principle and a specific approach, was not addressed or problematised in the analysed texts. It was not made clear, for instance, whether interactions lacking a face-to-face element still met the criteria of the ‘Dialogue’ principles. In some places, ‘dialogue’ was presented as distinct from written consultations whereas elsewhere it appeared that written consultations in the

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680 IJ2008/2110/UF, p.15.
681 Prop. 2009/10:55, p.56-57. See also the section Does this constitute a reform? at the end of this chapter.
682 See e.g. the different levels of participation referred to in Council of Europe 2009, p.7.
683 Skr. 2008/09:207.
form of remiss procedures was one form among many that ‘dialogue’ might take.685

As later chapters will show, the different usages of the term have created some confusion among those charged with implementing the reform ideas and participating in processes labelled as ‘dialogue’. The nature and consequences of this confusion are addressed in chapters seven and eight.

Summary of the reform’s framing in texts

This section has illustrated how the need for a reform of civil society involvement practices was framed alternately as a response to identified problems, and as a modernisation agenda that was promoted without explicit reference to problems or issues needing to be addressed.

Among the problems referenced in the texts, the first three themes: unequal access, poor mutual understanding and power asymmetry pertained to what institutionalist scholars may refer to as organisational failings686 or performance crises.687 The dominant argument here was that traditional involvement methods were seen to create or reinforce inequalities – both between civil society and the public sector, and among civil society organisations.

The fourth theme: complex policy challenges, pertained to issues in the surrounding environment; in this case how complex socio-economic problems were said to have highlighted the need to find better ways of utilising the expertise held within civil society. Such references to how growing social complexity had inspired a review of civil society involvement practices correspond with similar explanations given for the international spread of governance reforms, as outlined in chapter one.688 However, this was not a prevalent theme in either official texts or consultation responses. Instead, the emphasis lay on how established methods were seen to be failing to provide civil society organisations with equal opportunities for influencing decision makers.

Next, I demonstrated how institutional pressures in the form of demands from civil society organisations and inspiration and steering from other countries and sectors appear to have contributed to shaping the reform agenda. The use of the English Compact as a prototype for the Swedish Agreement was a key theme here, as was efforts by the European Union, the European Council and the United Nations to promote civil society involvement.

Turning to the solutions promoted in the analysed texts, these were notably lacking in specificity, leaving it largely to implementers to determine what they meant in practice. However, a few hints about what “good” involvement practice might entail were offered. From the synopsis presented above, we can deduce that an improved involvement practice was expected to incorporate the

685 See e.g. Prop. 2009/10:55, p. 57 & 65, where civil society’s involvement in ordinary consultations are listed as one of the factors indicating whether the ‘dialogue’ principle is observed.
687 Oliver 1992.
exchange of knowledge and experiences, and be based on equality and mutual respect. It might involve meetings and negotiations. It should have a clear purpose, with feedback provided to participants once the process is completed. Efforts should be made to involve the people and organisations most affected by the issue at hand, with advice on who this ought to include to be sought from civil society when appropriate. Moreover, civil society involvement in decision making should be a regular rather than occasional occurrence, its timing determined by the purpose of the exercise rather than the habits or convenience of public servants.

Whereas these suggested improvements were sometimes made with explicit reference to how past practices had failed to meet these standards, this was not always the case. Instead, the proposed improvements often stood alone, only implicitly hinting at an issue or problem seen to need addressing. By juxtaposing the solutions with a corresponding issue or problem, these themes can thus be read as another source of insight into what the authors of these texts perceived to be problematic in the government-civil society relationship. This exercise reinforces the list of problems outlined above, among them that the public sector was seen to have failed to make the most of what civil society had to offer and that the relationship between the sectors was seen to suffer from a lack of clarity, trust and understanding.

As outlined in chapter two, the degree to which a reform is framed as primarily a response to a present problem or as an attractive innovation without such links being made, is expected to affect how it is received by target audiences. It is generally assumed that organisations are more likely to conform to a call for change when doing so is seen to address a problem experienced and acknowledged by the organisation. However, other factors are also expected to affect organisations’ likelihood to adopt a promoted reform. These include the degree of coercion with which it is exerted, the extent to which it appeals to a convincing normative vision that persuades target organisations of its necessity, the fit between the reform ideas and the values and practices already represented within the organisation, and the strength of the mimetic forces that prompt organisational actors to follow organisational fashions.

Understanding the meaning of recent attempts to reform civil society involvement practices in Sweden thus also requires an investigation of these other dimensions. The next section provides another piece of the puzzle, by presenting affected actors’ attitudes to the studied reform ideas, as expressed in interviews. Their perceptions of its subsequent dissemination, implementation and impacts are addressed in forthcoming chapters.

692 This is what Pache & Santos (2010) refer to as ‘internal representation’, see chapter two.
5.3 Affected actors’ interpretations of the reform ideas

The above pages have presented a summary of how the need to reform civil society involvement practices was formally framed in official texts and civil society consultation responses. Yet, as we know, what organisations state in writing is rarely the full story. In the case of public policy, the gaps between official rhetoric, underlying motivations, target audiences’ multiple and divergent interpretations, and a policy’s eventual effects on practice can be significant.694 In the present study, it is expected that the vague formulation of the reform ideas and the cross-sector, multi-level settings in which they were construed and disseminated, amplified the potential for multiple and conflicting interpretations.

With the aim to offer another perspective on the formal framing of the reform, this section turns our attention to how affected actors interpreted the reform ideas. As such, the section also serves to provide insights about how governance-inspired reform ideas have been interpreted at the micro-level in Sweden; that is, by individuals in the organisations affected by them.

Affected actors’ attitudes to the reform ideas

In the following, I present four broad categories of attitudes that interviewed actors exhibited in response to the studied reform ideas. These were: enthusiastic, sceptical, pragmatic, and indifferent.695 The categorisation serves an analytical purpose here by introducing the different interpretive communities present among interviewees. It is not, however, intended to be read as a representation of actual empirical groupings.

The enthusiastic category, firstly, refers to the positive attitude displayed by those individuals who endorsed the reform ideas and played an active role in driving them forward. Some of these had been instigators or contributing authors of the original policy documents, or had acted as process facilitators or architects of dissemination activities such as training programmes or handbooks. Some had been early adopters and advocates of the reform ideas in their respective organisations. A few of these individuals took a personal, active interest in involvement practices and how they could be improved, seeking out reading materials, training courses or conferences on the subject. As will be explored in forthcoming chapters, such instances of discursive and informal activities appear to have played a particularly important role in the dissemination of the present reform.

Another category of enthusiastic attitudes were expressed by less proactive and vocal actors. These were individuals who were positively disposed to the reform ideas, without necessarily taking an active part in developing or

695 This categorisation is inspired by Dvora Yanow’s (2000, 2003, 2007) conception of ‘interpretive communities’: groupings of actors differentiated by their contrasting understandings of and attitudes to the policy in question. See chapter three for more.
disseminating them. They were individuals in civil society or the public sector who saw a need for a reform of involvement practices, either on the basis of their own experience or because they had been swayed by arguments made by others. They were willing to try new approaches and to share any new experiences and benefits with colleagues and networks, and in this way contributed to the spread of the reform ideas. For many of these individuals, the way the reform was framed in the *Agreement* and the *Civil Society Bill* was portrayed as uncontroversial and broadly positive. In the language of the institutionalist theories introduced in chapter two, they saw the reform ideas as functional tweaks of the means of involvement. That is, they did not pose any radical challenges to established values, and were therefore considered easy for target audiences to endorse.696

Whilst positive interpretations of the reform ideas were thus relatively widespread among the interviewed actors, many nonetheless retained a critical perspective on the wording and the practical implications of the ‘Dialogue’ principles. *Sceptical attitudes* were expressed by respondents who suggested that the vague wordings of the reform texts meant that public bodies could endorse them without needing to make any practical changes to their involvement work. As an illustration of this, a number of respondents reported occasions where involvement activities had been presented as instances of ‘dialogue’ without being seen to live up to the essence of the principles, a theme explored further in chapter seven. Some interviewed actors who were in favour of the reform ideas in principle thus voiced scepticism about their ability to make any practical difference to the public sector-civil society relationship. The difficulty of convincing uninitiated or uninterested colleagues of the value of new or more considered involvement approaches was also raised as a potential obstacle to the reform ideas becoming institutionalised across the public sector. These themes, too, are discussed in chapter seven.

Other actors from both sectors were sceptical not only of the reform ideas’ operability but of their substantive value. One category of sceptical attitudes was exhibited by individuals in either sector who, while they may have recognised that existing involvement practices had flaws, did not believe that the changes proposed in the reform documents constituted an improvement. Some dismissed the promoted approaches as unrepresentative, pseudo-democratic or as temporary public management fads. Particularly vocal on this topic were people who had been involved in the *Agreement* process and who objected to the methods used there, which coloured their attitudes to the resulting document. A common theme was that whilst these types of ‘dialogue’ processes may give the impression of inclusivity, they were seen to fall short in terms of representativity and accountability, and did little to address actual power imbalances. One civil society actor, commenting both on the dialogue process that preceded the *Agreement* and the finished document, said:

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The process was below par from a democratic point of view. There were no opportunities to anchor it [in our organisations] and the participating group was not representative of anything. The results were what they were.\textsuperscript{697}

In contrast to the broad majority of interviewed actors who appeared to see the reform ideas as technical tweaks of existing involvement practices and, as such, considered them fairly uncontroversial, a few of the sceptics thus interpreted them in a more radical light.\textsuperscript{698} They saw the reform agenda as the Government taking steps away from Sweden’s traditional model of interest group involvement in representative democracy, towards a less clearly defined and, in their eyes, less democratic approach.

Some of the sceptics further saw the ‘Dialogue’ principles as symptoms of an ideological shift that was seen to affect the public sector-civil society relationship at the time. The Alliance Government’s ambition to increase the number of civil society service providers in the fields of health and social care, one of the stated motivations for initiating the Agreement,\textsuperscript{699} was seen by some as covert efforts by the Government to reduce costs and abscend from its responsibilities to the public. It was suggested that the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill constituted attempts to mask what was essentially a cost-cutting privatisation agenda as democratic innovations.\textsuperscript{700} A local-level public servant made the following comment on this topic:

\begin{quote}
Perhaps dialogue is not the primary goal but rather a consequence of an increased tendency in the public sector to see civil society as a cheap resource and an alternative way of producing what the public sector no longer has the energy or the resources to provide.\textsuperscript{701}
\end{quote}

Another type of sceptical attitudes was expressed by civil society representatives who were content with their current relations with the public sector and did not recognise the need for a change. Some enjoyed long-standing, close contacts with politicians and senior civil servants through personal relationships, policy advisory councils and similar arrangements. For them, the introduction of new approaches to civil society engagement, perhaps involving a significantly larger numbers of organisations, appeared as a distraction and a potential threat to their existing relationships. This observation was made both by representatives of civil society organisations experiencing this dilemma and by public servants who mentioned it as an obstacle to the reform being endorsed by their contacts in civil society. In the words of one government official:

\begin{quote}
As noted, not all affected actors adhered to this critical view of the Agreement; others applauded what they saw as a welcome acknowledgement of the extensive social contributions already carried out in civil society and the potential for improved conditions for nonprofit service providers.\textsuperscript{702}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[697] Interviewee 17, civil society representative, national level, 2009.
\item[699] IJ2008/2110/UF, p.5.
\item[700] As noted, not all affected actors adhered to this critical view of the Agreement; others applauded what they saw as a welcome acknowledgement of the extensive social contributions already carried out in civil society and the potential for improved conditions for nonprofit service providers.
\item[701] Interviewee 38, public servant, local level, 2014.
\end{footnotes}
We already have, since a long way back, a pensioners’ committee and a disabled people’s delegation and a user delegation, where we routinely, at least twice per year, meet these organisations. And the pensioners’ committee includes the five largest pensioners’ organisations who get to meet government ministers and so on. And they are a bit like “what’s this nonsense?” [in response to the Agreement process]. But at the same time, when we try to diversify and suggest other pensioners’ organisations who could be included, they say no: only they should take part and no others. They guard their interests.702

Yet another group of actors were neither enthusiastic nor critical of the reform ideas. These were individuals who took a pragmatic but dissociated stance on these policy developments. They did not pay particular attention to either problem definitions or their possible solutions, but simply got on with their involvement work (or, in the case of civil society representatives, their efforts to influence decision makers) as they always had done, drawing on the methods, contacts and developments that best served their needs at each moment in time. Indifferent attitudes, finally, were displayed by a small number of interviewed actors who considered themselves largely unaffected by the policy developments in focus here. This included individuals who did not consider civil society involvement a significant concern in their work and thus had little interest in efforts to improve it. They could also be civil society representatives who rarely sought to influence policy. A few respondents pointed out that for many local organisations in particular, influencing policy processes was not a priority; they were primarily interested in getting on with their work. They engaged with the public sector when the need arose, such as in relation to funding applications, but lacked the interest or ability to allocate resources to taking part in ‘dialogue’ on broader issues. A couple of interviewees thus argued that civil society organisations at the national and local level had different needs and agendas. They suggested that the ideas about ‘dialogue’ that appeared in the Agreement and Civil Society Bill were the hobbyhorse of a small group of national level umbrella organisations and held less relevance for the majority of local level actors. In the words of one local authority official:

the national Agreement (…) it’s the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions and the Government and these organisations that Forum703 works with – large organisations with secretariats and employees, who might want to influence political discussions. But the organisations we work with here in our local districts, they are not [like that] at all. They don’t exist here, with a few exceptions.704

These findings thus resonate with Pache and Santos’ observation, discussed in chapter two, that organisational members do not necessarily take a strong stance for or against institutional pressures. Much of the time, they will be indifferent

702 Interviewee 5, public servant, government department, 2009.
703 Forum – idéburna organisationer med social inriktning, one of the instigators of the Agreement process.
704 Interviewee 33, public servant, local level, 2014.
to pressures to change, or will conform partially or nominally to a reform as they see necessary, without fully embracing the underlying ideas.705

It should be acknowledged that as a result of how respondents to this study were selected, there was likely an over-representation of the enthusiastic category, particularly among the public sector actors interviewed, and a likely underrepresentation of the indifferent category. This was due in part to the fact that the first two rounds of interviews focused on people who had been actively involved in the Agreement process, many of whom took a keen interest in the value and implementation of its ‘Dialogue’ principle. It was also a consequence of the fact that when new respondents were sought for the later rounds of interviews, those in the public sector who volunteered or were nominated were typically individuals whose job descriptions included civil society involvement in some form, making them likely to be more informed about, and possibly more positively disposed to, this topic than their colleagues. Meanwhile, civil society respondents were frequently senior representatives of their respective organisation and were arguably less likely to be biased in favour of the reform ideas on account of their position in the organisation.706

However, the categories were not static. As will be discussed in chapter seven, a person whose attitudes placed them at the enthusiastic end of the spectrum in the first round of interviews may, a few years later, belong among the pragmatists. In other cases, individuals who started out as indifferent or sceptical may later, as a result of positive experiences of new involvement practices, turn into vocal enthusiasts for the potential of improving the means of involvement. A change of circumstances, job description, personal interest, new experiences or weariness may all contribute to people changing their attitudes to the reform ideas. Moreover, and as noted above, those who gave the appearance of not being interested in the reform efforts could still turn out to be affected by them over time. They may find themselves adjusting their working approaches to the norms and standards introduced as a result of the reform; another topic returned to in forthcoming chapters.

Affected actors’ understandings of ‘dialogue’

As noted in the analysis of the formal framing of the reform ideas in texts, the term ‘dialogue’ plays a central role in these policy developments. In both the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill it was used as a heading for the Government’s ambitions for the future direction of civil society involvement in decision making. Yet the term had different usages in the analysed texts. Most commonly, its meaning was broad, referring to a range of different types of

705 Pache & Santos 2013a, p.6. This is what elsewhere in the literature is referred to as ‘ceremonial’ or ‘symbolic’ conformity; see e.g. DiMaggio & Powell 1983, p.150-153; Meyer & Rowan 1977; Oliver 1991, p.154-155.
706 See note on selection bias in ch. 3, under Selection of respondents.
interactions between the sectors, whilst at the same time retaining strong normative connotations pertaining to the nature and intent of these interactions.

Broadly, this corresponds with how the ‘dialogue’ term was used in interviews. A small number of the interviewed actors, typically belonging to the more enthusiastic category described above, appeared to adhere to a stricter definition of the term, as a specific approach to engaging civil society in decision making. Some of these referred to criteria set out in the Council of Europe’s Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation, the ladder or participation model\textsuperscript{707} and similar guidelines. These were primarily people who had been actively involved in the Agreement processes or who took an active interest in improving participatory practices in their organisations.

However, the majority of interviewed actors appeared to pay little attention to these terminological questions. On the occasions when the definition of ‘dialogue’ was discussed in interviews, many had never reflected on its meaning and were unable or unwilling to do so. Many appeared to prefer a less prescriptive definition of ‘dialogue’. When asked what the term meant they made references to positive traits of the types listed above, such as that ‘dialogue’ involves ongoing, constructive exchanges between equals, but were reluctant to be more specific. The following quotes, by a civil society representative and a local political representative respectively, illustrate how such interpretations were voiced in interviews:

I guess it sounds sort of inclusive and nice, to have a dialogue group (…) I imagine that people are less threatened by the word. It sounds welcoming, like this is a place where you can join in and express yourself.\textsuperscript{708}

[using the term dialogue] implies that there’s a genuine will to include, that we’re going to develop something together. And if you’re doing that you need to move away from the local authority informing [the organisations] about things; to actually getting stuck in together. (…) To use the term dialogue is a way of showing that you can actually talk about things together.\textsuperscript{709}

That many respondents adhered to these types of normative connotations became clear when they brought up instances of civil society involvement that were seen to not live up to the standards set out in the ‘Dialogue’ principles. A few actors from either sector expressed frustration with how the ‘dialogue’ label was used in their organisations and called for clearer guidance to ensure that colleagues used the term appropriately. Some suggested that the label’s normative connotations, combined with its lack of a clear definition, encouraged organisations to apply it nominally to activities that did not meet the original intentions of the principles. Again, this theme is addressed further in chapter seven.


\textsuperscript{708} Interviewee 45, civil society representative, local level, 2014.

\textsuperscript{709} Interviewee 32, elected representative, local level, 2014.
Why now?

Another question discussed in interviews was why the studied reform agenda was seen to have emerged when it did. What did affected actors think had contributed to the recent interest in reviewing and reforming civil society’s involvement in public decision making in Sweden?\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^0\)

When reflecting on this question, a number of the interviewed actors attributed the reform agenda to what they claimed was a growing sense in the public sector that it could no longer manage its public service commitments alone. Increasingly, the state was seen to rely on the help of external actors, both in finding solutions to complex social problems and in providing services to the public. Again, this recognition may not be altogether new; as noted, Sweden has a long tradition of involving select parts of civil society and the private sector in public decision making. Yet it was argued that the need to do so had become more acute in recent years, and that, simultaneously, perceptions of whom the public sector may turn to had broadened. This meant that more parts of both the private sector and civil society were now said to be viewed as potential speaking partners to the state.

In affected actors’ interpretations of what had caused this development, three interlinked themes emerged. Firstly, several respondents suggested that the financial crises of the 1990s and 2000s had had a transformative impact on the public sector-civil society relationship.\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^1\) A recurring argument here was that the recessions had simultaneously contributed to creating social instability and reducing the public funds available for maintaining adequate public services. A suggested consequence of this was that civil society organisations operating in these fields had gained more recognition, becoming at once more valued and more relied upon by the public sector.

Secondly, a number of interviewed actors from either sector suggested that these broader developments had contributed to an ongoing ideological shift that was said to have affected political visions for civil society.\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^2\) In this context, the centre-right Alliance parties’ election victory in 2006 was brought up by some as having marked a new direction for the government-civil society relationship. The repeated references to civil society in the 2006 Prime Minister’s speech, followed by three attempts in short succession to create national level agreements with civil society,\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^3\) were seen, alongside the launch of the Civil Society Bill in 2009, to have sent strong messages about the then Government’s intentions for the future public sector-civil society relationship. When these political developments were brought up in interviews, a common theme was that as civil society organisations became seen as partners to the state in the provision of public services, their role as advisors to decision makers also changed. In the words of one respondent from a national-level civil society organisation:

\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^0\) In reflecting on this question, respondents in the early rounds of interviews commented on the background to the Agreement as a whole rather than the ‘dialogue’ principle specifically.
\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^1\) E.g. interviewees 3, 13, 33, 34, 43.
\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^2\) E.g. interviewees 1, 7, 13, 14, 33, 54.
\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^3\) Pertaining to the “social field”, integration and culture.
We had a change of majority in the city hall and the Government. That brought in people with a different view on the voluntary sector, perhaps a slightly naively positive perspective on civil society. It was notable in the Prime Minister’s speech that the Moderate Party holds a firm view that the public sector complements civil society. And it was already noticeable, irrespective of the Agreement, that they wanted a more positive dialogue, that we were more partners than grant recipients.714

Thirdly, and echoing the theory in the governance literature that governance reforms are a response to increased policy complexity,715 a few of the interviewed actors suggested that adding to the challenges posed by dwindling public funds was the emergence of new, complex social problems that required more resources or different types of skills and expertise to be solved.716 These themes were primarily raised in later interviews, where the 2015 refugee crisis was repeatedly mentioned as a development said to have underscored the public sector’s new reliance on civil society. A national-level respondent elaborated that in seeking to address such complex challenges, the public sector was forced to break away from its traditional, bureaucratic working practices, making it more open to external input and new problem-solving strategies:

There are more and more issues that are so complex that we are not able to grasp them anymore. That is where local and regional authorities are beginning to open up. But we’re essentially public administration organisations: hierarchical and bureaucratic. That logic is pretty ingrained. But the more people are faced with these complex issues, such as the refugee crisis, it becomes evident that we cannot manage them internally any more. We can’t manage them with our own experts. So that’s when we start to operate in different ways.717

These reflections thus provide some insights into why affected actors believed that attitudes to civil society had changed in the first decades of the twenty-first century, paving the way for a review of civil society’s involvement in public decision making. Macro-level developments affecting the social and economic climate in Sweden dominated the explanations given, alongside speculations about how these had contributed to – or been driven by, depending on who you asked – a shift in political visions for civil society’s role in the Swedish public sector. In this sense, the accounts by affected actors were more consistent with the governance literature’s tendency to explain governance as a response to complex policy challenges, than the formal rhetoric provided in policy texts and consultation responses.

It should be noted, however, that the majority of respondents did not consider themselves to be instigators of these policy developments and that these were not first-hand accounts of why affected actors themselves had adopted the reform ideas. When they reflected on the timing of and reasons behind the

714 Interviewee 13, civil society representative, national level, 2011.
715 As mentioned in chapters one and two.
716 E.g. interviewee 2, 7, 14, 26, 52, 72.
717 Interviewee 2, other, national level, 2016.
studied reform agenda they were largely confined to speculations, and their accounts should be read with this reservation in mind.

5.4 Discussion: understanding the reform’s appeal

In this concluding section I summarise and draw out the key points from this chapter, in order to begin to answer my first research question: how can we understand the reform ideas’ appeal to instigators and target audiences? Over the following pages, I first identify four themes from the chapter’s findings that provide clues to the reform’s appeal. Next, I return to the issue of labelling presented in chapter two, by asking if the studied policy developments constituted a reform and, if so, what was its nature?

Problem- and solution-driven framings of the need for change

Identifying the issues that a change in involvement practices was meant to address required some searching: they were not always articulated in the texts and the interviewed actors were often uncertain about what, precisely, had prompted the reform agenda. It became evident that calls for a review of civil society involvement practices had not emerged solely in response to a set of observed and clearly articulated problems. Rather, in texts and interviews alike were frequent references to how involvement methods ought to be modernised and improved, without any explicit mention of how existing methods were failing. The reasons given for reform can thus be broadly split into problem-driven and solution-driven framings of the need for change.\footnote{C.f. Cohen, March & Olsen 1972; Greenwood & Hinings 1996; Oliver 1992.}

In the problem-driven category, perceived failures of past involvement practices dominated. Traditional methods, such as the remiss procedure or civil society advisory councils, were presented in both texts and interviews as perpetuating a power imbalance between the sectors. They were also seen to create or reinforce inequalities among civil society organisations, who did not all have the same access or ability to take part. Remiss procedures were said to take place too late to have a meaningful influence on policy developments, reducing civil society’s role to commenting on policy proposals rather than contributing to shaping them.

These issues were said to be exacerbated by ongoing changes to the composition of Swedish civil society.\footnote{As described in Amnå 2006; SOU 2007:66.} The official texts stressed that traditional organisations were losing members, as citizens were allocating their time in new ways: becoming more likely to engage in ad-hoc volunteering and activism. This raised questions about representativity: who were the organisations with privileged access to decision making actually representing, and who was systematically excluded from traditional involvement
opportunities? The upshot of these observations was that a system designed to interact primarily with large, stable organisations with formalised and democratically structured internal decision-making and a recognisable legal status, was found unfit for accommodating the influx of new, often smaller and more informal organisational forms.

Another issue seen to necessitate a review of the public sector’s relationship with civil society was the alleged emergence of new and complex policy problems that required broad-based expertise and collaborations across sectors and national borders. These types of problems were in turn seen to have contributed to decision-making structures becoming more internationalised and complex, leading some to suggest that civil society’s role as a link between citizens and decision makers ought to be strengthened. While these arguments were not very prevalent in the formal rhetoric provided in texts, they were occasionally brought up in interviews, as affected actors speculated about the reasons behind the recent surge in interest in public sector-civil society interactions.

The solution-driven framings of the need to review civil society involvement included lists of desirable qualities that such activities should aspire to, and references to inspiring practices picked up in other countries and settings. The use of the English Compact as inspiration for the Swedish Agreement was a frequently mentioned example. The European Union and other international institutions’ impact on this agenda through different instances of soft regulation and discursive steering were also frequently referred to in both texts and interviews; a theme discussed further in the next chapter.

The constructivist institutionalist perspectives on organisational behaviour described in chapter two, offer ways of explaining the challenges I experienced in seeking to understand the motivations behind these policy developments. Scholars from this tradition have suggested that the origins of reforms may not be found solely in the emergence of new problems or the failures of past practices. Rather, it should be sought in the convergence of any such issues with current ideas about how an organisation should conduct its activities. The origins of these, in turn, are likely to be found in the democratic ideals and public management norms that prevail at the time.

Problem-driven and solution-driven motivations thus interplayed when the case for reform was made. This resonates with what Eric Abrahamson identified as the mutually reinforcing influences of socio-psychological forces and macro-level events on organisational fashions. At times, the demand for change and the proposed solutions came packaged together, alerting target audiences both of why change was needed and what needed to be done. This meant that the attempted reform also served to create or articulate a demand for change among those who were not aware that change was needed.

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Symbolic and normatively loaded reform language

The articulation of a shared need for change was arguably aided by the broadly positive connotations of the reform language and its core ideas. While the ‘dialogue’ label was used in several different ways in texts and interviews, it was generally found to have strong normative undertones. The term tended to be associated with a number of positive qualities, such as inclusivity and reciprocity, with shared aims, and with working together to overcome differences of perspective and opinion. Applying the ‘dialogue’ label to interactions with civil society was thus seen as a way for organisations to signal that they were progressive and receptive to others’ points of view. For civil society organisations, activities labelled as ‘dialogue’ could be seen to hold promises of a more equal, inclusive and respectful treatment by the public sector; making them a potentially worthwhile allocation of their time.

In short, ‘dialogue’ sounded good. In so far as these normative claims were accepted, the ideas contained in the ‘Dialogue’ principle were easy to buy and hard to object to. For public sector decision makers, committing to make civil society involvement more reciprocal, interactive, inclusive and consequential could be seen to bring a number of potential benefits, such as improving the bases for decisions, building a more constructive relationship with civil society organisations, and making a good impression on funders, auditors and stakeholders.

Thus, while the interviewed actors were by no means unanimous in the belief that making practice of these ideas would change the public sector-civil society relationship for the better, few questioned the power of the ‘dialogue’ label to attract interest in both sectors. In this sense, the concept’s usage resonates with the notion of rationalised myth outlined in the theoretical framework, and lends support to Meyer’s notion that an idea’s popularity is not necessarily an indication of its operability. Rather, Meyer has suggested that it may be qualities such as an ideas’ suitability for “abstraction, generality and universality” that determine whether it captures the attention of organisational change makers.722 This argument, too, finds support in the presented findings, as will be explored next.

Versatile and ambiguous reform ideas

The policy texts that set out the reform ideas and the Government’s commitments were notably lacking in details. This meant that their practical implications were open to multiple interpretations. These are not unusual characteristics of formal policy texts, which tend to leave room for interpretation on the part of those charged with implementing them. As noted by Dvora Yanow among others, retaining a degree of purposeful ambiguity in policy writings is a particularly common strategy in situations of divergent or conflicting interests, where doing so allows decision makers to move forward with policy developments.

without alienating key stakeholder groups. Sørensen and Torfing have further pointed out that ambiguity is a common feature in governance reforms, on account of these having “no clearly defined and commonly accepted rules, norms and procedures and no formal constitution that predetermine how legitimate decisions are made”.724

Both explanations have bearing on this study, which deals with the attempted introduction of governance mechanisms that were at least in part portrayed as new, and the handling of multiple and sometimes conflicting interests in the drafting and dissemination of the reform ideas. The need for the policy message to be kept imprecise may have been particularly keenly felt during the writing of the Agreement, a document that was not set to be legally binding and the writing of which was guided by an ambition to reach consensus among a highly diverse group of participants. It has been suggested that this goal could only be achieved by maintaining a degree of imprecision in the text.725

The interview study suggests that many affected actors saw a value in not defining the reform ideas more explicitly, as doing so was seen to risk making them too prescriptive. Their reluctance to link the ‘Dialogue’ principles to specific definitions or criteria thus echoed the way the label was used in official texts. Yet the absence of a universally recognised definition of ‘dialogue’ also meant that any number of activities could be categorised under this label. The ambiguity and versatility of the reform ideas, made necessary by the multiple interests involved in the reform’s creation and the divergent organisations targeted by them, thus brought a potential downside: that they would become stretched to the point of losing their intended meaning. This theme, too, is further explored in forthcoming chapters.

A familiar message

The policy texts were also vague on what, if anything, distinguished the contents of the ‘Dialogue’ principles from traditional approaches to civil society involvement in Sweden. Only the Civil Society Bill made any attempt to demarcate ‘dialogue’ or “expanded consultation” from traditional consultation methods. It did this by referring to how the promoted approaches were to be more interactive, open to more or different participants, occurring more frequently, or taking place earlier in a decision-making process.726 The interview study confirmed that the commitments included in the ‘Dialogue’ principles were not seen as particularly new in the fields of health and social care policy. The reform ideas can thus be said to fit well into the established tradition of civil society involvement in public decision making in these policy fields, something that appears to have further added to their appeal.

The interviews further indicated that the content of the reform texts could be interpreted in several different ways: as a confirmation that the targeted

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725 Gavelin 2010; Nordfeldt 2012.
organisations were already on the right path, as a technical tweaking of existing practices, or as a radical departure from the traditional approaches to civil society involvement in public decision making. The familiarity of the reform ideas combined with their vague presentation in texts thus meant that organisations could commit to them without this implying an acknowledgement of past wrongdoing, a commitment to making any radical changes to practice or, indeed, any changes at all.

Is this a reform, and, if so, what kind?

In order to determine to what extent the policy proposals analysed in this chapter represented an ambition to change past practices or not, requires an understanding of what these past practices were and what changes, exactly, were proposed. Whilst the former task is straightforward enough, the latter, as we have come to see, is more complex. The policy texts analysed here were vague on what distinguished the proposed improvements to civil society involvement practice from traditional approaches. As mentioned, only the Civil Society Bill made any attempt to demarcate ‘dialogue’ or expanded consultation from traditional consultation methods.

Despite these ambiguities, I maintain that ‘reform’ is an appropriate label for these policy developments. With an understanding of the term as an attempt to make some kind of improvement – albeit for reasons that may not be clear cut, well-articulated or widely agreed upon – the ideas outlined in the ‘Dialogue’ principles in the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill can indeed be understood as attempts or intentions to reform civil society involvement in decision making in Sweden.

It should be acknowledged that the interviewed actors themselves rarely used the reform label when discussing these specific policy developments. However, on the occasions where the question of labelling was brought up in interviews, no one objected to the publication and subsequent dissemination of the ‘Dialogue’ principles being conceptualised as attempts to reform civil society involvement practices. Consequently, this is how I continue to refer to them in the remainder of this thesis. My frequent use of the looser concept ‘reform ideas’ reflects the fact that this was not a legally enforced reform programme, and that similar ideas were communicated through different institutional pressures at once, not all of which stemmed from the policy texts analysed here. A discussion on this topic continues in the next chapter.

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728 In the previous chapter, I describe the traditional Swedish model of civil society involvement as involving certain types of organisations – typically large, democratically organised and often federally structured – being represented on public decision-making boards and governmental commissions, responding to remiss procedures, engaging in lobbying activities and maintaining informal relations with decision makers.
729 Brunsson & Olsen 1990, p.13-14; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011, p.2. See chapter two for a further discussion about the reform concept.
730 On occasion, however, the broader Agreement document and its accompanying dissemination structures were referred to as a reform programme.
As noted, reforms vary in the extent to which they represent a radical departure from past traditions, or rather a more subtle tweaking of established practices. In chapter two I referred to Greenwood and Hinings’ distinction between radical and convergent organisational changes, and Pache and Santos’ similar differentiation between institutional pressures pertaining to the ideological or the functional level. Both sets of authors agree that changes that are primarily technical in nature, that do not challenge an organisation’s core values, are more likely to be accepted and implemented. Meanwhile, reforms that require a re-assessment of the organisation’s core goals and values are, unsurprisingly perhaps, more likely to meet objections and resistance.

As we have seen, the loose framing of the studied reform meant that it could be interpreted both as a technical tweaking of established practices, and, occasionally, in a more radical sense, as a departure from Sweden’s traditional approach to interest group involvement in public decision making. Whether public officials charged with implementing these policy proposals interpreted them as calls for change or not, and, if so, whether that change was considered radical or in line with established norms and values, would depend in part on their past working practices; some may conclude that they were already abiding with these principles. It would also depend on how affected actors interpreted the proposals’ practical implications, what weight they attributed to the reform documents and those charged with disseminating them, and how willing they were to turn a critical eye on their own involvement work; all themes that are explored further in forthcoming chapters.

This chapter has found that whilst the majority of interviewed actors appeared to understand the reform ideas as promoting relatively uncontroversial, technical adjustments of established involvement practices, a minority interpreted them in a more radical light. They saw the Agreement process and the subsequent implementation of the ‘Dialogue’ principles as the Swedish Government taking steps away from established approaches to interest group involvement in decision making, sacrificing values such as representativity and accountability in favour of principles such as inclusion and flexibility. In the eyes of some, this was seen as a challenge to Sweden’s traditional model of representative democracy. Whilst only a few of the interviewed actors upheld this more radical understanding of the reform ideas, and those who did were overwhelmingly critical of them, the fact that the reform was susceptible to such divergent interpretations is an important factor to consider in forthcoming discussions about its dissemination, implementation and alleged impacts.

In the next chapter I continue my examination of the reform’s appeal, by exploring the means by which its messages have spread between and within organisations.

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6. The reform spreads

The publication of the Agreement in 2008 and the Civil Society Bill the following year marked a time when enthusiasm for discussing civil society’s status in Swedish society was high – at least among initiated actors. A number of dissemination and implementation activities were set in motion to put the ambitions outlined in these documents into practice. New working groups, networks and umbrella organisations were set up, conferences were held and studies were launched to assess and analyse their impact. Alongside these activities, related ideas about how civil society involvement could be improved were promoted by other bodies in Sweden and abroad.

As noted in previous chapters, this thesis draws on constructivist institutionalist theories that have posited that the way organisations respond to institutional pressures to change is a function of the interplay between the contents and nature of the pressures and the internal dynamics of the target organisations. With the previous chapter having examined the contents of the reform, the purpose of this chapter is to describe and analyse the different institutional pressures at play in spreading these ideas across Sweden’s public sector and civil society. This involves asking how affected actors have interpreted the different functions played by these institutional pressures and how the cross-sector, multi-level setting in which the reform was situated appears to have affected its dissemination. The perceived effects of these activities – that is, affected actors’ interpretations of any changes that had taken place and any challenges that remained in the wake of the reform attempts – are presented and analysed in the next chapter.

The chapter begins with a brief outline of the formal efforts carried out to spread and implement the ideas about civil society involvement set out in the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill. Next, I present affected actors’ perceptions of the different functions played by these and other institutional pressures pertaining to similar ideas.

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734 The concept of ‘institutional pressures’ refers to the formal and informal mechanisms by which ideas, values and practices influence organisational behaviour: demands and expectations that organisations adapt to in order to achieve success and status in their field. See e.g. Oliver 1991; Pache & Santos 2010.

735 Greenwood et al. 2010; Oliver 1991; Pache & Santos 2010.
6.1 Formal steering and dissemination activities

This section gives an overview of how the ideas described in the previous chapter were spread and implemented at the national and local level in Sweden. Over the following pages, I first describe the formal dissemination and implementation activities that took place at the national level: by the Swedish Government, civil society organisations and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. Next, I present the local adaptation of these ideas in Uppsala local authority. These accounts are primarily descriptive and are based on documentation from public bodies and civil society organisations, complemented with additional information provided in interviews.

Government-led dissemination and implementation activities

At the time of writing, the Government Offices’ implementation of the Civil Society Bill and the Agreement is led by the Ministry of Culture (Kulturdepartementet). Its democracy and civil society unit leads an interdepartmental working group where public servants from all government departments meet to discuss and share experiences from their interactions with civil society. The unit further conducts annual surveys to map the extent of contacts and consultations with civil society within the Government Offices. At times, it provides advice and support pertaining to civil society involvement to other departments and public bodies, including the development and promotion of new involvement methods. In 2015-16, the unit led the development of a new method for government consultation with civil society labelled ‘thematic consultation forum’ (sakråd) The method, said to be designed in accordance with the Civil Society Bill’s principles and the European Council’s Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation, has been presented as an ad-hoc, flexible approach to involvement, to be used when public bodies need civil society input on policy-specific issues. Participating organisations are selected on the basis of their factual knowledge and particular perspectives. Following a series of pilot projects, the Government decided in February 2017 to roll the approach out across the Government Offices.\(^{736}\)

Wider implementation of the Civil Society Bill is overseen by the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor, MUCF). The Government’s instructions to the Agency includes that it should administer a cross-sector forum (partsgemensamt forum) with the purpose of hosting ongoing ‘dialogue’ between the Government and civil society.\(^{737}\) At the time of writing, the forum consists of 16 civil society organisations.


\(^{737}\) SFS 2015:49 Förordning (2015:49) med instruktion för Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor. In addition to these instructions, directives on how the Civil Society Bill is expected to be implemented are provided to all
representatives, elected annually, and a smaller number of public servants from the Ministry of Culture and other government departments who are selected on the basis of the issues to be discussed. Chairmanship rotates between civil society organisations and the Government Offices. The forum meets four to five times per year with each meeting addressing a separate topic. Each year’s discussions are summarised in an annual report published by the agency.738

In accordance with Government directives, the Agency for Youth and Civil Society also hosts a network for public agencies addressing their relations with civil society. The stated goal of the network is to “provide public agencies with knowledge about civil society and to strengthen their ability to collaborate with organisations on issues where civil society is affected or where their engagement and expertise can be utilised”.739 Twenty-seven public agencies were included in the network in 2017. Surveys of how the participating agencies interact with civil society organisations resulted in the reports *Vem gör vad?* (Who does what?), published in 2016 and 2017.740 At the time of writing, the agency had recently set up a parallel network targeting public agency directors.

In addition to these activities, the Youth and Civil Society Agency is charged with collecting and sharing information on civil society’s circumstances, composition and development. It also evaluates efforts to implement the *Civil Society Bill*. The agency commissions research on various topics pertaining to civil society and disseminates their research findings to public bodies and others. It regularly publishes in-house reports on topics covered in the *Civil Society Bill*. The agency is also formally responsible for administering funding for the follow-up and implementation of the *Agreement*, and for overseeing dissemination of good practice for civil society involvement in other ways, including by promoting the European Council’s *Code of Good Practice on Civil Participation*.

**Cross-sector efforts to implement the Agreement**

Following the completion of the *Agreement*, a joint steering group (*gemensamma arbetsgrupper, GAG*) and a secretariat (*överenskommelsekansliet*) were set up to oversee and administer its implementation. The funding of the secretariat is administered by the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (*Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor, MUCF*) in accordance with Government directives.

Both the steering group and the secretariat remain active at the time of writing, the former having met approximately once per month since its creation.

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738 In 2016, the themes covered by the forum were: civil society and integration, civil society organisations as employers, civil society in community planning and civil society and the state’s early warning system. MUCF 2017a.
in 2008. The steering group is responsible for directing and overseeing the implementation activities carried out by the secretariat. These include commissioning research, organising an annual conference, publishing an annual report\(^\text{741}\) and providing resources and support to regions and local authorities looking to set up an agreement between the public sector and civil society. The group consists of two representatives from the Government, nine from civil society (four of which attend each meeting) and two from the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges kommuner och landsting, SKL).

Efforts to disseminate the ideas contained in the Agreement to local and regional levels of government have been shared by several bodies. Both the secretariat and each signatory have been tasked to spread information about the principles and guidance on how local or regional authorities can achieve their own agreements with civil society. Levels of activity have varied, however, with the idea-based organisations in particular reporting to be struggling to meet their own ambitions in this area due to a lack of funding.\(^\text{742}\) The three signatories report their implementation efforts to the secretariat on an annual basis.

Civil society-led dissemination and implementation activities

When the Agreement was published, the idea-based signatories had their own list of commitments to attend and report back on to the secretariat. Under the ‘Dialogue’ principle, they committed that they would “strive to develop” effective collaboration models locally and regionally. They also committed to help stimulate local and regional agreement processes.\(^\text{743}\) Under the ‘Transparency’ principle, they committed to protecting their right to raise criticisms against the public sector.\(^\text{744}\)

Following the launch of the Agreement, a coordinating group (Idéburnas samordningsgrupp, SOG) was set up to oversee the idea-based organisations’ efforts to implement these commitments.\(^\text{745}\) The group consists of civil society representatives elected at an annual meeting which is open to all idea-based signatories of the Agreement. It oversees and reports on the idea-based organisations’ commitments and implementation activities. Representatives from the coordinating group participate in the joint steering group set up to administer the implementation of the Agreement.

Beyond this forum, civil society organisations have also played a role in the implementation of the ‘Dialogue’ principle in the Civil Society Bill through their

\(^\text{741}\) Överenskommelsen 2016 Återrapportering 2016 från den gemensamma arbetsgruppen för uppföljning av Överenskommelsen mellan regeringen, idéburna organisationer inom det sociala området och Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting.

\(^\text{742}\) Gavelin 2010; Nordfeldt 2012.


\(^\text{745}\) www.ideburna.se. See also Gavelin 2010, p.24, 30-31; Nordfeldt 2012, p.38-41.
involvement in the Agency for Youth and Civil Society-run cross-sector forum (partsgemensamt forum) described above.

Elsewhere, civil society organisations have participated in international networks that seek to influence how national and international bodies involve civil society in policy processes. An example of the latter was the involvement by a representative from the organisations Famna and the National Forum for Voluntary Organisations (Forum) in the creation of the European Council’s Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process.746

Dissemination by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions

Since 2005, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting, SKL) has had a small team working to develop and promote civil society involvement in local and regional decision making. Following the Association’s decision to participate in and sign the Agreement, it has remained represented on its joint steering group. It, too, had a short list of commitments included in the Agreement, pertaining primarily to spreading awareness of the agreement model and supporting local and regional authorities in building strategic relations with civil society.747 The association runs networks and courses for local and regional authorities and publishes reports on the themes of civil society involvement, collaboration and coproduction for local and regional authorities.748 Developing sustainable relations between local authorities, regions and civil society is one of the association’s strategic priorities.749

Local adoption: the case of Uppsala

The implementation of the national Agreement thus involved a series of initiatives to encourage similar working models at local and regional level. In the years that followed the launch of the Agreement, several authorities set such a process in motion.750 One of these was Uppsala local authority, the setting for the local-level interviews carried out in this study. When the national Agreement was launched in 2008, Uppsala Local Authority was not new to the idea. In fact,

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746 Council of Europe 2009.
747 IJ2008/2110/UF, p.27.
749 Its strategic plan for 2016–19 declares that the association "shall initiate systematic processes for developing models for long-term sustainable relations between local and regional authorities and civil society’s voluntary and idea-based organisations on the basis that these constitute a third sector alongside local authorities and actors in different markets". Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting 2016 Ansvår för välfärd. Inriktningen för Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting kongresperioden 2016-2019.
750 At the time of writing, 19 such local or regional-level agreements exist. http://overenskommelsen.se/vart-uppdrag/dialogprocess/sverigekarta (September 2017).
a local agreement between the authority and associations described as having “a social orientation” (socialt inriktade organisationer) had been in place since 2001, making Uppsala the first Swedish city to create such a document. In 2009, the city council (kommunfullmäktige) decided to instigate a new agreement process, this time extended to all policy areas and all local associations. The process was to be overseen by the Elderly Committee (äldrenämnden) and the Health and Care Committee (nämnden för hälsa och omsorg) and was to be conducted “in accordance with the national Agreement between the Government, SALAR/SKL and idea-based organisations in the social field”.752

Following a start-up period of a number of months, during which the authority informally explored whether there was interest in the proposal among its existing civil society networks, a process for creating a local agreement was set in motion. A working group was set up, consisting of a public servant, a local civil society representative and an external facilitator. A wider ‘dialogue’ process was formally initiated with a conference to which all local organisations known to the local authority were invited. Conference attendees voted in favour of a continued process, and a collaborative drafting process involving a group of civil society and local authority representatives began. The resulting agreement was presented in early 2013 and was accepted by the City Board in the spring of that year. The document was based around five principles: dialogue, social development, autonomy, quality and diversity and integration. Its ‘Dialogue’ principle states that:

Respect, responsibility and openness characterises the dialogue between associational life and Uppsala local authority. The dialogue takes into account both parties’ conditions and interests and makes use of both parties’ perspectives and knowledge. The parties maintain the right to determine the boundaries for their openness.753

The work to implement the local agreement allegedly stalled in 2015 as a result of efforts to deal with the refugee crisis, to be picked up again in autumn 2016. At the time of writing, Uppsala local authority is in the process of producing action plans for the local agreement’s implementation and revising the document in time for the five-year anniversary of its launch in spring 2018.

751 Uppsala Kommun 2013b, Överenskommelse mellan Uppsala föreningsliv och Uppsala kommun.
752 Uppsala Kommun 2013a, KSN-2013-0274 Lokal överenskommelse mellan föreningslivet och Uppsala kommun (LÖK) Förslag till beslut.
753 Uppsala Kommun 2013b.
754 Early autumn 2017.
6.2 Affected actors’ perceptions of the institutional pressures at play

When the public sector and civil society actors interviewed in this study reflected on the various institutional pressures through which ideas about reforming civil society involvement practice had spread, a couple of dominant themes emerged. Firstly, many respondents suggested that calls for more inclusive or interactive civil society involvement had become more frequent in formal steering initiatives such as soft regulations, audits and evaluations issued by the Government, funders and international institutions in the years covered by this study. These regulatory activities were said to have been complemented by a proliferation of discursive steering activities, taking the form of training courses, conferences, handbooks and the like, produced by organisations and networks in both the public sector and civil society.

Interviewed actors further suggested, however, that the reach of these formal steering activities would have been limited had they not also been accompanied by informal channels of dissemination, such as colleagues and networks sharing ideas and experiences with each other. Here, several interviewees pointed to the important role played by individual reform advocates within the public sector and civil society in spreading the reform ideas within their organisations and networks. Another perceived observation was that raised expectations among civil society organisations had put further pressure on the public sector to amend their working practices. The next few pages address each of these themes in turn.

Formal steering

As noted in chapter two, the steering of public bodies typically involves three overlapping and complementary dimensions: regulation, auditing and discursive steering.\(^{755}\) The accounts provided by actors interviewed in this study suggest that each played a distinct part in the dissemination of the reform ideas in focus here.

**Regulations**

The actors interviewed in this study were broadly in agreement that whilst the ideas contained in the ‘Dialogue’ principles were not necessarily new to the Swedish public sector, the expectation that civil society involvement should form a mainstream part of decision making had become more explicit and widespread in recent years. One way in which this trend was said to be manifested was in regulations, taking the form of government policies and assignments, European Union or United Nations directives, grant conditions and internal steering documents, among others.

\(^{755}\) Jacobsson & Sundström 2006, p.82-87.
When discussing this regulatory trend, actors were reluctant to point to the Agreement or the Civil Society Bill as its dominant sources. Indeed, some interviewees claimed to be unaware of the Agreement’s existence, despite their role involving engaging civil society organisations in policy making in the fields of health and social care. Instead, formal calls for civil society involvement in decision making and service delivery were seen to have been in place for some time in many parts of the health and social care policy fields. Respondents from both sectors listed disability policy, elderly policy and drugs policy among areas where civil society involvement was a long-standing practice and continued to be the subject of ongoing developments and innovations.

A number of interviewees pointed to developments at the European level as an early source of steering and influence over this agenda. As noted in chapter four, both the European Commission and the Council of Europe have been promoting civil society involvement in programme delivery and decision making for some time. Sweden joining the EU in 1995 was thus brought up by several actors as having inspired and accelerated a review of the public sector-civil society relationship in Sweden. It was suggested that EU membership had added a new layer to Swedish politics, with implications both for how the public sector relates to civil society and how civil society organisations seek to influence decision making.

One way in which the European Union was said to have contributed to this agenda was that its structural funds often included the requirement that public sector grant recipients collaborate with or have a policy for collaboration with civil society. This was brought up by a couple of interviewees as a reason behind many local and regional authorities taking steps to review and reformulate their relationships with civil society organisations from the mid-1990s onwards.

Another source of steering on civil society involvement mentioned in interviews was the United Nations. The UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, drafted in 2006 and ratified by Sweden in 2009, was raised as an example in a couple of interviews. The Convention stipulates that states should involve individuals with disabilities and organisations representing them in its implementation. One official from a public agency speculated that the UN Convention had influenced the Swedish Government to include posts on systematic civil society involvement in its public service agreement (regleringsbrev).

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756 E.g. interviewees 66, 70, 72. As noted, many of the actors interviewed in this study had been personally involved in both initiating and running the disseminating activities listed above. As discussed in chapter three, it is possible that this personal involvement created some bias in their reporting. Equally, however, when affected actors claimed to have had little exposure to efforts to disseminate the Agreement or the Civil Society Bill, it is possible that they had nonetheless been affected by them. The connection between broader government policy and specific directives is not always made explicit. Thus public servants charged with reforming a civil society advisory council in their organisation, for instance, might not reflect on the policy developments that preceded that instruction, and would not think to report on such a connection in an interview.

757 E.g. interviewees 58, 66, 67, 68, 70.


759 Interviewee 67, national public agency, 2017.
Another example listed was the Government’s HIV and AIDS strategy, launched in 2005, which recommends that voluntary organisations should be given a bigger say in the development of new strategies for the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Some actors from both sectors mentioned regulatory developments in the closely related fields of service user involvement and coproduction of public services as having boosted interest in reviewing the public sector’s approaches to civil society involvement.

Despite these examples of activities preceding or taking place in parallel to the reform ideas articulated in the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill, this agenda was said to have gained fresh momentum around the time that these documents were launched in 2008-2009. Several interviewees, particularly at the national level, pointed to the inclusion of the ‘Dialogue’ principles in the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill as a factor that had contributed to the spread of these ideas across the public sector.

The steering examples listed in interviews as having contributed to spreading the reform ideas thus contained a mixture of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ measures. As noted in chapter two, however, the distinction between the two is often blurred. Whilst some of the mentioned examples of steering had a clear sender and entailed some element of legal obligation, thus seemingly belonging to the hard regulation category, they often left plenty of room for interpretation on the part of those targeted by them, placing them at the ‘softer’ end of the scale. An example is when a UN convention calls for countries to consult civil society organisations on certain policy issues, without specifying what form the consultation should take or how its results should be incorporated in decision making. Government instructions stipulating that public agencies should establish civil society advisory panels without specifying their purpose or design are another example.

**Evaluations and audits**

Alongside and functioning as an extension of these regulatory measures, demands pertaining to civil society involvement were also reported to appear more frequently in programme evaluations and other kinds of public sector auditing. The examples mentioned in interviews broadly corresponded with those listed in the section on Formal steering and dissemination activities above. One was that government departments and public agencies were asked to report annually on their ‘dialogue’ and consultation activities with civil society to the Ministry of Culture, which in turn reported their findings to the Agreement secretariat. Another example mentioned was the County Administrative Boards’ (länsstyrelser) audits of how local social services
collaborate with civil society organisations, an assignment that was written into the Agreement.768

Evaluation and auditing tend to function as extensions of regulations and, like them, can be placed along a spectrum ranging from strict to more lenient varieties. Where on the spectrum an auditing activity belongs depends on how it is formulated, whether a failure to comply leads to formal sanctions or not and the nature of those sanctions. The character of the audit or evaluation can also affect the efficacy of the regulation to which it is attached. A piece of regulation that is ostensibly legally binding but lacks an effective follow-up structure thus becomes “softer” than its legal status suggests.

An example of soft auditing in this context was when public bodies were asked to report on how many instances of civil society ‘dialogue’ or consultation they had engaged in in a year, without clarification of what these terms meant. A number of the interviewed actors highlighted the pitfalls of such methods.769 It was suggested that many ongoing efforts to monitor civil society involvement in the public sector appeared to emphasise quantity over quality. It was argued that this seeming preference for quantitative measures encouraged public bodies to exaggerate the extent of their involvement activities, whilst giving them little incentive to review and improve their form. This theme is further explored in chapters seven and eight.

Some of the interviewed actors further pointed out that the benefits they most valued from taking part in involvement activities, such as receiving new information or enjoying the benefits of more trusting, constructive relationships, were not captured in these evaluation efforts.770 Hence, while the inclusion of questions about civil society involvement in evaluations and audits were seen to have helped make the reform ideas more widely known, they were rarely brought up as examples of steering measures that had had a direct or positive impact on the public sector’s actual involvement practices.

Discursive steering
The above examples of regulations and auditing carried out to promote a reform of civil society involvement practices were complemented with discursive forms of steering. These have included professional networks, training courses and the production and dissemination of practical guidance on civil society involvement. Interviewees from both sectors suggested that recent years had seen a proliferation of such activities, stemming both from the government’s efforts to implement the Agreement and Civil Society Bill and from other sources.

The mentioned examples of networks and guidance led by the Government Offices’ democracy and civil society unit, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions and the Agency for Youth and Civil Society, were

768 In Uppsala, where interviews were conducted less than two years after the completion of the local agreement, the interviewed actors appeared unsure about whether they were formally required to report on civil society involvement, although a few claimed to routinely include such activities in their annual reports to the executive board.
769 E.g. interviewees 7, 33, 37, 38, 43, 45, 48, 56, 62.
770 E.g. interviewees 2, 43, 57.
repeated in interviews. Describing their own role in this dissemination effort, one government public servant said:

Authorities don’t know how to consult civil society organisations. So they call [me] at the Government Offices who comes to tell them how to conduct different types of consultations if you’re a public body. What to consider and not consider and how to do it. And I refer to the principles and all that. So I can tick off that I’ve actually been out there spreading the Agreement. In that sense we always bring it with us (…) It’s always there, they know that the Government backs these principles.771

Another civil society actor, commenting on the perceived impact of the implementation structures set up after the Agreement, stressed how these ongoing, discursive activities appeared to have made a difference by raising awareness of the reform agenda over time:

There are things that I don’t think would have happened if that infrastructure hadn’t been in place. (…) I doubt that the thematic consultation forum approach [sakråd] would have been created without it. (…) This low-key, persistent work [has meant that] more and more public bodies are paying attention to civil society. I recently read an interview with the new county police commissioner,772 who said that civil society is a precondition for them fulfilling their mission. Just 10 years ago that wouldn’t have been mentioned.773

The discursive steering activities listed by interviewed actors were not all directly connected to the efforts to disseminate the Agreement or the Civil Society Bill. A few of the public servants interviewed referred to the Swedish Agency for Participation’s (Myndigheten för delaktighet)774 and the Agency for Health and Care Services Analysis’ (Myndigheten för vårdanalys)775 respective efforts to create and spread recommendations on civil society involvement in health and disability policy.776 Actors further pointed to a perceived increase in discursive steering to promote civil society involvement at the European level. The European Council’s Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process was frequently mentioned as having contributed to raising the expected standard of civil society involvement across the public sector. The code was drawn up by the Council in collaboration with a group of cross-European civil society organisations and was subjected to extensive consultation with civil society before its launch in 2009. Several actors from both sectors claimed to use it to inform themselves and colleagues about the definitions and

771 Interviewee 14, public servant, government department, 2011.
772 Länspolischef.
773 Interviewee 7, civil society representative, national level, 2016.
774 The Swedish Agency for Participation works to promote the implementation of disability policy in all aspects of Swedish society.
775 The Agency for Health and Care Services Analysis works to promote patient and citizen perspectives in health and social care. See e.g. Myndigheten för vårdanalys 2015, Sjukt engagerad. En kartläggning av patient- och funktionshindrörörelsen.
776 E.g. interviewees 67, 70, 71.
practicalities of different approaches to involving civil society in public decision making.\textsuperscript{777} As noted, the Government has tasked the Agency for Youth and Civil Society with promoting the code as part of its efforts to disseminate and implement the \textit{Civil Society Bill}.

**Informal pressures**

Alongside these examples of formal steering to promote the attempted reform of civil society involvement practices, many of the interviewed actors pointed to the role played by more informal channels of dissemination in spreading and embedding ideas about civil society involvement. \textit{Informal talk}, \textit{learning-by-doing}, the role played by \textit{individual reform advocates} and \textit{raised expectations} among civil society stakeholders were the dominant themes in these accounts.

A recurring theme in these accounts was that a political decision was not sufficient for a new idea or practice to take root in public organisations. Such formal declarations needed to also be accompanied by \textit{talk}: colleagues discussing, persuading and inspiring each other to change their ways of thinking and working.

Interviewed actors further suggested that exposure to positive involvement processes played an important part in generating enthusiasm for the reform ideas.\textsuperscript{778} It was suggested that as more public sector workers had taken part in positive, productive interactions with civil society organisations, many had had their eyes opened to the benefits that could be derived from them. \textit{Learning-by-doing} was thus emphasised as a powerful tool for generating support for the reform ideas. The following quote exemplifies how such claims were made in interviews:

\begin{quote}
I think that I initially thought that [civil society involvement] was to do with creating buy-in to protect politicians. But with time I have discovered that you get a lot of good input. I often feel quite alone – Swedish Government ministries are small. You are fairly alone in reading negotiation papers and the like, so more people who help and actively work with it leads to better results. Initially I thought about how we could protect ourselves in these processes, but more recently I personally have thought of it as a win-win situation.\textsuperscript{779}
\end{quote}

One national level public servant described how the \textit{Agreement} process and the subsequent efforts to implement its principles had opened their eyes to the contribution that civil society organisations could make to their work. This interviewee, along with similarly enthusiastic colleagues, was now trying to convince others in their department who had not had the same insights of the value of civil society involvement – a task they did not always find easy:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{777} E.g. interviewees 2, 3, 7, 8, 14, 43, 56, 67, 68, 69, 70, 72.
\textsuperscript{778} E.g. interviewees 5, 13, 14, 56, 63.
\textsuperscript{779} Interviewee 56, public servant, government department, 2016.
\end{quote}
For me it’s natural to bring this up at unit meetings and group meetings. I feel that my unit has become engaged and think this is really interesting and positive. But others are further removed and don’t take part and when they do it’s more out of duty.  

Public servants who worked in policy areas with an active civil society constituency were said to be more likely to be positively disposed to involving them in decision making, with the exception of areas where relations between the sectors were particularly strained.

In both formal and informal dissemination activities, *individual reform advocates* from either sector were portrayed as an important driving force. These were presented as individuals with a personal conviction of the value of the reform ideas, who actively contributed to spreading them to different settings. Reform advocates were said to feature in both civil society and the public sector. In the public sector, they tended to be public servants or elected representatives who were charged with, or took it upon themselves, to spread ideas about civil society involvement among colleagues and networks. Some claimed to be spurred by their own, positive experiences of such initiatives, whereas others simply took a personal interest in involvement practices, chose to learn more and made it their mission to influence leaders, colleagues or networks. A local public servant described how they and their colleagues had worked in this way to influence the political leadership to take a greater interest in civil society involvement:

> Here at Uppsala local authority it’s been us officials who have been pushing it and implemented it among politicians. No one has sent us to a seminar or a course and said “Go to this because it’s important”. We have read about it or seen it in real life, and [realised that] well, if we’re going to do something here in Gottsunda or Stenhagen we really need to involve the voluntary organisations.

On a similar note, a state secretary reflected on how the enthusiasm and drive of their officials had enabled their department to develop more interactive and innovative engagement methods:

> These group leaders are pretty dynamic people: driven and enthusiastic. So they have the energy to think about more than just day-to-day matters. And that’s infectious for the other staff members. It’s a great help for us in the political leadership; having competent staff is vital.

Some of these individuals fitted the description of reform entrepreneurs presented in chapter two. They transferred ideas and practices between organisa-
tions and networks, filling the role of experts that others could turn to for advice on how to develop their involvement practices.\textsuperscript{786}

Whilst these individuals were broadly described as essential for the successful dissemination and implementation of the reform ideas, several of the interviewed actors noted that relying on individuals to drive the reform agenda forward also made it vulnerable.\textsuperscript{787} There was a risk, they claimed, that the work these people started would fizzle out if or when they moved to new positions. In the following quote, a public servant reflects on this risk, referring both to the legacy of a colleague in another agency and to their own position, which they were soon about to leave:

\[\ldots\text{She is a pretty new employee there, but she’s been really trying to improve their [civil society] council. It hasn’t been functioning well for some time, and then she arrives and it becomes really good. And that makes you think: what happens when she moves on? Is it that dependent on individual people? \ldots\text{(\ldots)} And I guess it’s the same here, now that I’m leaving. I don’t think anyone’s going to care that much about [civil society involvement] so it’s probably going to disintegrate. That makes you wonder whether it’s actually a good thing that I’ve been doing this, created expectations among civil society organisations, and then I leave and it’s not prioritised anymore. Was that good or bad?}\textsuperscript{788}

Actors interviewed at both the national and local level were thus broadly in agreement that the fate of any continued attempts to improve or increase interactions between the public sector and civil society relied on the sense of ownership of these issues spreading to more people and departments within the public sector; what might be referred to as a strengthening of the internal representation of the reform ideas.\textsuperscript{789}

Another mechanism identified as driving the reform agenda forward was raised expectations among civil society actors, said to be manifested in them demanding better involvement opportunities from public bodies. Actors from both sectors suggested that recent years had seen certain civil society representatives become more vocal and specific in their demands for influence.\textsuperscript{790} One example of this was how a few organisations had been instrumental in initiating and drafting the Agreement, as described in chapter four. As more organisations began to vocalise similar demands, this was said to have increased the pressure on public bodies to review their involvement methods. On this topic, a respondent from a national civil society organisation reported that they had become more likely to protest when they felt that the public sector was only inviting them to contribute as a box-ticking exercise:

\textsuperscript{786} E.g. Christensen & Laegreid 2003; Meyer 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin 2008; Tomson 2008.
\textsuperscript{787} E.g. interviewees 1, 2, 7, 14, 33, 34, 39, 41, 42, 43, 48, 49, 56.
\textsuperscript{788} Interviewee 56, public servant, government department, 2016.
\textsuperscript{789} Pache & Santos 2010.
\textsuperscript{790} See chapter seven for more on this theme.
If I get the feeling that we’re being kept as an alibi [to create legitimacy], I often go [to meetings] just to bring that up, that this is not OK but I’m here to tell you that. It’s very much a case of talking about the elephant in the room. And we have the courage to do that much more nowadays.791

Similar observations were reported at the local level, where a perceived increase in demands to be heard from certain factions of civil society was said to have preceded, but then been boosted by the local agreement process. Two quotes, from a civil society representative and a local public servant, illustrate these alleged developments:

There has been a change: we meet up and we don’t live in our boxes anymore, we have an affinity. And there’s a wish from the idea-based sector that the local authority tells us about things happening and about new perspectives before it’s too late.792

This process has led to a lot of new contacts, and of course we’re not let off the hook so easily anymore, with the organisations expecting us to do certain things. They expect us to maintain a dialogue.793

Again, developments at the European level were highlighted as one source of influence behind this perceived increase in demands from civil society organisations. References were made to European civil society networks that had lobbied for increased civil society involvement in decision making, both within the European institutions and in their member states.

Again, interviewed actors commented that the closely related trends of coproduction and service-user involvement appeared to have given civil society organisations a new boost of confidence. One public servant made a link to how health care patients appeared to have become more vocal in demanding influence in recent years, both individually and in groups:

People [no longer] take for granted that what they are told by health care providers is correct. They are knowledgeable, well-read and they question things. They take matters into their own hands much more. The user choice reforms also mean that you need to be more on top of things to try to influence the care you get. And of course the organisations are also affected by this, which makes their influence stronger.794

This purported rise in confidence among parts of civil society, combined with the formal attempts to reform civil society involvement practices, thus appear to have had a mutually reinforcing impact. Civil society organisations put pressure on public bodies to endorse the ‘Dialogue’ principles and the European Council’s Code of Good Practice. Their expectations and confidence further boosted by these formal endorsements, civil society organisations then continued to vo-

791 Interviewee 26, civil society representative, national level, 2016.
792 Interviewee 36, civil society representative, local level, 2014.
793 Interviewee 40, public servant, local level, 2014.
794 Interviewee 63, national public agency, 2016.
calise their demands for better involvement practices, thus sustaining an informal pressure that served as a degree of protection against public bodies becoming complacent in their implementation of the reform ideas.

Balancing the carrot and the stick

When discussing the functions played by different institutional pressures in dispersing the reform ideas, a few interviewees highlighted that the studied reform was not one suited to authoritative steering. In particular, it was not considered within the Government’s mandate to dictate how local or regional public organisations should conduct their relationships with civil society stakeholders. The formal steering measures put in place to implement the ‘Dialogue’ principles in the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill thus appeared to have been largely interpreted as efforts to raise awareness of and encourage new perspectives on the civil society-public sector relationships, rather than coercing public bodies to change their working methods. One national public servant spoke of a need to strike a balance between the “carrot and the stick” in making public organisations take the reform ideas on board:

There are constant gaps in knowledge about what civil society is. People forget that civil society is a third sector. And there’s nothing else we can do than try to increase people’s knowledge. (...) It takes time and it’s a matter of using the carrot or the stick.795

This public servant, along with several others,796 drew comparisons to the Government’s gender equality policy, which was seen to have struck a successful balance between the two:

We do have examples where it has worked, in the work that the Government has been doing on gender equality, where it’s been a mix of encouragement and steering. And that’s what we need to do with civil society too, you can encourage to a degree but we also provide clear steers by [offering] forms for meetings, we provide templates, checklists. It’s not a matter of whether one should meet with civil society organisations but how. And we follow that up continuously.797

Affected actors’ views of the different institutional pressures by which the reform ideas were seen to have spread were coloured by their own role in the dissemination structures and their personal attitudes to the reform ideas. As noted, many of those involved in these activities held overlapping roles within them; for instance by both having participated in drafting the ‘Dialogue’ principles in the Agreement process and, later on, taking part in disseminating or implementing its messages. Some actors applauded what they saw as clear political steers about the importance of making better use of civil society’s input

795 Interviewee 52, public servant, national level, 2016.
796 E.g. interviewees 27, 52, 56, 58.
797 Interviewee 52, public servant, national level, 2016.
in public decisions. This group included public sector workers who welcomed that spending time and resources on engaging civil society was now formally sanctioned. In the words of one local-level public servant:

I think it really helps as a public servant to have this foundation to stand on, that it’s a political decision and we’re a political organisation so this is the deal. We’re supposed to hold a dialogue with associations, it’s something you’re meant to spend time on.

Actors from both sectors suggested that these instances of formal acknowledgement had helped make civil society more visible as a stakeholder in policy making. However, not everyone shared this relative enthusiasm. Some argued that the formal steering on civil society involvement coming from the Swedish Government and the European Union was excessive. An example was when one civil society representative expressed dismay at the Government funding the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions programmes to promote user and civil society involvement among local authorities and regions. They suggested that in doing so, the Government was overstepping its mandate and breaching the principle of local self-determination:

This Government bribes SALAR in different ways, including in this directive to implement user involvement, which SALAR receives funds for. That’s really new, that SALAR conducts work ordered by the Government in that way. I can’t remember that happening before, with local self-determination being such a strong principle; it’s such an important part of the Swedish system.

Yet another group suggested that the efforts to disseminate the ‘Dialogue’ principles had been too weak: patchy in reach, short of financial backing or devoid of sanctions for non-compliance, all factors said to have put constraints on their potential impact. Hence, whilst overly rigid and authoritative steering was deemed counterproductive to changing involvement practices, steering that was considered too “soft” was also seen as problematic, as it left the burden of responsibility for the reform’s implementation too heavily on the shoulders of individual public servants. In settings populated with driven and influential reform entrepreneurs, the reform ideas were said to be more likely to be implemented with enthusiasm. Where the political leadership and public servants lacked the will or resources to devote time to these issues, however, they left less impact. Some of the interviewed actors thus called for formal steering efforts to be firmed up, with clearer guidelines given on the type and quality of involvement practice expected of public organisations. These topics are discussed further in the next two chapters.

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798 E.g. interviewees 13, 33, 40, 50.
799 Interviewee 40, public servant, local level, 2014.
800 Interviewee 17, civil society representative, national level, 2011.
801 E.g. interviewees 28, 38, 43, 56.
6.3 Discussion: the mutually reinforcing functions of formal steering and informal institutional pressures

This chapter has found that the reform ideas presented in chapter five appear to have spread in the Swedish public sector through a number of channels, not all of which can be attributed to the formal efforts to implement the Agreement or the Civil Society Bill. Instead, interviewees pointed to several other sources of steering and influence through which ideas about civil society involvement had spread. Many of these appeared to be independent of these two policy texts, with some having been in place for several years prior to the specific policy developments in focus here.

The complementarity of soft regulations and discursive steering

This chapter has further suggested that the regulatory and auditing measures used to spread the reform ideas had primarily taken a ‘softer’ character, in the sense that they were not legally binding and that they left significant scope for interpretation and editing on the part of the organisations targeted by them. Whilst the study indicates that these varied steering efforts had had the combined effect of raising awareness about the reform ideas across the public sector, their efficacy for ensuring that the quality of involvement practices matched the intentions of the ‘Dialogue’ principles was repeatedly called into question by the actors interviewed here. Quantitative and poorly defined audits and evaluations were highlighted as particularly problematic, as they were seen to encourage perfunctory involvement practices and exaggerated self-reporting of public bodies’ activities. This theme is explored further in the next chapter.

Alongside reports of an increase in soft regulations and audits to promote and measure civil society involvement, interviewees pointed to a perceived proliferation of discursive steering activities designed for the same purpose. These included the creation of handbooks, training courses, conferences, networks, working groups and similar, set up by public sector bodies and civil society organisations alike. Often, these discursive activities served not only to promote the idea that civil society involvement should take place, but also offered practical guidance on what constituted good involvement practice. In this way, they could be seen to redress some of the shortcomings pertaining to the lack of clear definitions and practical guidance in regulation and auditing measures, as highlighted above.

Discursive steering dominated the formal dissemination activities listed in the first part of this chapter. They were more likely than regulations or audits to be mentioned in interviews as measures that affected actors claimed had influenced

802 Jacobsson & Sundström 2006.
803 This resonates with how the functions of soft and discursive steering approaches are described in the governance literature. See e.g. Palumbo 2010; Cohen 2007; Mörth 2006.
their own thinking and working. This can be read as an indication that discursive steering is particularly suited to the type of policy developments in focus here. Indeed – and as discussed in chapter five – this reform, conceived and disseminated by networks of professionals from both the public sector and civil society, was never intended to be implemented through hard regulations. On the contrary, the reform’s framing in texts was intentionally ambiguous and versatile. This was likely a result both of how it was conceived – the ‘Agreement having been drawn up collaboratively in a cross-sector setting by organisations of very different types and agendas – and how it was intended to be used: by public bodies of varying degrees of autonomy at different levels of government. Several of the interviewed actors pointed out that it was not considered the Government’s place to dictate how other public organisations should conduct their relationships with civil society stakeholders. Rather, just like the ‘Dialogue’ principles’ lack of clear definitions and practical guidelines likely contributed to them being endorsed by the Agreement signatories and included in the Civil Society Bill, so the vague wordings of the reform ideas appeared to have eased their spread to other parts of the public sector.

This has meant that it has been largely up to the people charged with implementing the reform ideas to decide what they meant in their respective settings and how they should be translated into practice – if indeed they should. In organisations where a decision was made to reform involvement practices, the discursive steering activities provided a supporting structure that could be tapped into for practical guidance and collegial support.

The importance of informal pressures

Affected actors were broadly in agreement, however, that whatever the measures applied, formal steering alone was not considered sufficient to ensure that the reform ideas would spread and take root across the public sector. It was suggested that informal talk and raised expectations among colleagues and networks had played a significant role in generating interest and support for the studied reform ideas. Examples of such informal interactions included colleagues inspiring each other with stories of positive experiences of civil society involvement, individual public servants taking an interest in such practices and seeking out information or training on their own, learning-by-doing and civil society representatives pushing their contacts in the public sector to raise the quality of their involvement work.

Individual actors with a personal enthusiasm for these ideas and practices emerged as particularly important in spreading the reform ideas. However, while these advocates were portrayed as crucial to the reform’s dissemination, they can also be seen as indications of its vulnerability. That the reform agenda remained the concern of a few, initiated individuals put it at risk of collapsing when these moved on to new positions. As will be discussed, this can be read as
an indication that the reform ideas remained some way from being institutionalised in the studied settings.

Although many of the interviewed actors were reluctant to elaborate on how specific steering measures had guided their work or attitudes, the consensus appeared to be that the continued presence of multiple forms of steering, informal talk and pressure from stakeholders, all delivering similar messages about the importance of reviewing civil society involvement practices, had contributed to making the reform ideas more mainstream. And regardless of which steering mechanisms dominated the reform ideas’ journey between organisations, they were interpreted, translated and edited to fit with the values and practices of the organisations receiving them. The next chapter continues the investigation by looking at affected actors’ perceptions of their implementation and impacts.
7. The reform takes root – or not?

When participants of the Agreement ‘dialogue’ process were asked, three years after its launch, if the document had made a difference, the most common response was that they claimed to have observed an increase in ‘dialogue’ between the public sector and civil society.\textsuperscript{804} What they meant by these observations is the topic of this chapter. Here, I address my second research question: \textit{has the attempted reform been seen by affected actors to bring about any changes to the public sector-civil society relationship in the affected policy areas?}

The chapter begins with a brief summary of how civil society involvement in decision making was said to happen in the years following the launch of the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill. These accounts, which are based on how interview respondents described their own experiences of the public sector-civil society relationship, are intended to provide a snapshot of the diversity of tools and strategies in use at the time of the interviews.

I then turn to the question of whether anything was seen to have changed in the public sector-civil society relationship following recent and ongoing attempts to reform involvement practices. Had affected actors observed any changes in attitudes or practices? Were any of the problems said to have prompted the reform agenda seen to have been addressed?

Next, I ask what the interviewed actors identified as remaining issues and challenges seen to impact on the reform’s implementation and on civil society organisations’ abilities to influence decision makers.

The chapter ends with a summarising discussion looking at evidence of institutionalisation and decoupling in the affected actors’ accounts of how the reform ideas had been received and implemented.

\textsuperscript{804} Nordfeldt 2012.
7.1 The relationship today

Involvement activities initiated by the public sector

When public servants recounted how they conducted their relationships with civil society at the time of the interviews, they painted a diverse picture. Established involvement methods such as remiss procedures and civil society advisory councils were said to remain the dominant forms, alongside ongoing, informal contacts between decision makers and civil society representatives.

The majority of interviewed actors from both sectors appeared to take a pragmatic and broadly positive view of these established approaches. The remiss procedure was largely portrayed as an effective tool for public servants seeking external input, and a worthwhile allocation of time for civil society organisations aiming to contribute insights on a specific policy issue. This was due to the remiss system’s highly formalised and institutionalised status in public decision making in Sweden and to the fact that decision makers were generally expected to take remiss responses into account. The following quote, by a state secretary, illustrates how the remiss procedure was portrayed by many public sector interviewees:

In some sense [the remiss procedure] is the most important [instrument] since we are obliged by law to do it. It’s quite rare that we’d go against massive criticisms from remiss respondents. What happens is that civil servants will go through all the submissions and then put together a memorandum where they might write that most respondents are in favour but such-and-such organisation had some objections, or whatever it might be. (...) And of course that’s really important. If lots [of respondents] are strongly for or against or if you notice that the entire disability rights movement objects, it makes you reconsider the proposal. If we’re unsure, we might meet some of them to get more arguments and discussions, perhaps see some organisations that haven’t responded. But it’s the mass of responses that’s the most important.805

Many civil society actors held similarly pragmatic and broadly positive attitudes to remiss procedures, claiming to prioritise them when time allowed. One respondent from a national organisation explained their view of the method as follows:

The remiss procedure is important because it actually has influence. Not always directly, but as a general rule, proposals are adjusted in response to the submissions. It’s rare that you’re able to overthrow a proposal in its entirety – although it has happened – but you can affect the details. And we do see that government departments read all the submissions and that we’re allowed to argue our case. They tell us that they sometimes use what they’ve learnt from the remiss responses when they’re out and

805 Interviewee 57, state secretary, government department, 2016.
about talking about the issues. And these reports endure, they become like a bible on
the subject for a long time. (...) I also find that if you are able to spend proper time on
them, the remiss submissions are a really useful way for organisations to continuously
update their standpoints on policy issues.\textsuperscript{806}

While interviewees from both sectors thus appeared to agree that the remiss
procedure remained a respected and valuable tool for civil society input, it was
not seen to be without its faults. The same criticisms that were raised in the
framing of the reform ideas, as presented in chapter five, were also heard in
interviews. These focused primarily on how responding to a remiss was seen as
a time-consuming and resource-intensive task, meaning that not all organisations
were able to do it well or at all. Some also pointed out that the traditional timing
of a remiss procedure – towards the end of a policy process and once proposals
had been drafted – gave those responding little scope for influencing the
strategic direction of policies. For organisations seeking influence at the
strategic level it was thus seen as an unsatisfactory method of achieving this end.

The use of civil society advisory councils – fixed groups of organisations
invited on a regular basis to discuss policy issues with senior decision makers –
was similarly portrayed as a method that, while filling a valuable function for
many public bodies and participating organisations, raised questions about
equality of access and the limitations of their potential influence. These themes
are discussed further in the second half of this chapter.

Alongside these established involvement methods were reports of ongoing
attempts to introduce new approaches or to make the traditional methods more
inclusive, flexible or interactive. Examples included the recently introduced
thematic consultation forums (sakråd) in the Government Offices;\textsuperscript{807} attempts in
some public bodies to restructure the membership or change the mandate of their
policy advisory councils; and an alleged increased in the use of hearings as a
means of reaching a larger and more diverse range of organisations. Affected
actors’ views on these activities ranged from the enthusiastic to the sceptical and
are explored further in later parts of this chapter.

Civil society’s proactive strategies for influencing decisions

The strategies for influencing decision makers that civil society representatives
listed in interviews included a mixture of reactive and proactive approaches.
While many organisations claimed to spend significant amounts of time
responding to and participating in the public sector-led involvement activities
described above, they also emphasised that they frequently created their own
channels of influence to suit their requirements and agendas. Typically, this
involved courting decision makers in different ways: raising issues in writing,
calling a public body to ask for meetings, or organising seminars and

\textsuperscript{806} Interviewee 6, civil society representative, national level, 2016.
\textsuperscript{807} See section 6.1.
conferences to which decision makers were invited. Several civil society respondents reported that they found it relatively easy to get access to decision makers and that they generally felt listened to in these interactions.\textsuperscript{808}

It was pointed out that civil society organisations tended to rely heavily on personal contacts in this type of work. A national-level civil society representative exemplified this with an account of the informal, ad-hoc methods they employed to influence Government ministers:

I just call them up. That’s it, it’s often on a personal level. We rarely send formal letters or petitions. That’s our weakness, I’d say, that a lot of it rests on myself and my contacts, that I know people. I know a lot of political advisors and press secretaries. And you have to go out at Almedalen and meet people, you have to be inspiring and likeable. We’ve invited all the party leaders over for coffee and they’ve all come bar one.\textsuperscript{809}

Various media outlets were also listed among the strategic tools used by organisations to influence decision makers. This was typically done by writing comment pieces or galvanising media attention for issues that the organisations were working on. A few respondents from both sectors expressed concern, however, that the media appeared to steer public debates, and thereby decision makers’ attention, to what they saw as a problematic extent.\textsuperscript{810} Some saw this as symptoms of an alleged movement in recent years towards a single-issue politics, whereby citizens’ political engagement appeared to increasingly focus on single issues rather than party-politics, and their involvement in civil society increasingly taking the form of ad-hoc volunteering rather than active organisational membership.\textsuperscript{811} One civil society actor described their double-sided relationship with the media as follows:

A lot of [civil society’s influence] happens outside of the traditional organisations, through looser networks and Facebook actions and so on. This single-issue mentality and ad-hoc activism is really significant. And I think that the media governs what’s considered important or not. By paying attention to issues and continuously raising them, it creates the impression that these are the biggest problems, the most important issues. It doesn’t have to be true, but it’s an issue that works as a headline. And at the same time, the media can be a great asset to us, so it’s a bit double-sided.\textsuperscript{812}

Some national-level civil society representatives further reported that they regularly bypassed the Swedish Government if they saw better opportunities for influencing policy through their own networks or contacts at the European level. Two respondents from national-level organisations described how this might happen:

\textsuperscript{808} E.g. interviewees 1, 7, 12, 13, 26.
\textsuperscript{809} Interviewee 26, civil society representative, national level, 2016.
\textsuperscript{810} E.g. interviewees 6, 33, 36, 57.
\textsuperscript{811} See e.g. Amnå 2006; Papakostas 2012 for discussions about these alleged developments.
\textsuperscript{812} Interviewee 6, civil society representative, national level, 2016.
There is a European agenda in favour of service user involvement, with user organisations coming from all over Europe to attend meetings. So we send a group there to snitch, so to speak, about what Sweden is doing or isn’t doing.813

So Brussels is giving clear directives that civil society should be consulted. But Sweden doesn’t bother. The document we received [for comments] was practically the finished product. And we had a lot of opinions about that. We submitted our views but never heard anything back. So that time we went to Brussels ourselves (…) we identified the officials who were going to read Sweden’s report and write the recommendations. And we presented our objections directly to them instead.814

These examples of proactive strategies said to be employed by civil society organisations to influence decision makers were presented in both a positive and a negative light. It was presented as broadly positive that organisations took control of their interactions with the public sector, being strategic in whom they approached and when, and, if necessary, circumventing formal involvement opportunities by building direct relationships with decision makers. This was seen by many organisations as a more effective strategy for placing their issues on decision makers’ agendas than waiting for an invitation to a formal consultation. It was perceived as negative, however, in the sense that organisations with established networks, or staffed by people with good networking skills, enjoyed privileged access to decision makers. It also meant that organisations sometimes found themselves reliant on individual staff members’ personal networks, making them vulnerable to losing influence if those individuals left the organisation.

To sum up, there was significant variety in the tools that public bodies reportedly used to gain civil society input and the strategies that civil society organisations deployed to bring their issues to decision makers’ attention. The relative efficacy of the different approaches continued to be the subject of discussion and disagreement among interviewees throughout the course of this study. To what extent current involvement practices were seen to have been guided by the reform attempts in focus for this research, and what issues and challenges remained as obstructions to the reform’s implementation, are topics addressed in the remainder of this chapter.

813 Interviewee 12, civil society representative, national level, 2011.
814 Interviewee 7, civil society representative, national level, 2011.
7.2 Perceived changes

Before turning to affected actors’ accounts of changes they claimed to have observed in the years covered by this study, it is useful once more to remind ourselves that these findings are based on individual actors’ subjective interpretations of events. Many of the interviewed actors were personally involved in the policy developments studied, making them well informed on the subject – but not necessarily representative of the wider field. Moreover, the individuals interviewed for this study represented a great diversity of organisations, perspectives and backgrounds. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that they were rarely in agreement with each other about the precise nature and impact of the changes they claimed to have observed. Whilst there might have been broad agreement among the interviewed actors that the public sector-civil society relationship had changed in some way in the years covered by this study, not all felt that the perceived changes had been substantial in their own field, or that they were all positive. More nuance on this topic is thus offered in the last part of this section, under the heading Questioning change, and in the next section, which addresses Remaining issues and challenges.

Perceived changes in attitudes

Interviewed actors reported a number of perceived changes in public sector attitudes to civil society involvement, said to have taken place in the years covered by this study. Broadly, these pertained to public servants’ knowledge about civil society, their appreciation of civil society’s input in policy processes, and perceived shifts in the political visions for civil society’s role in Swedish policy making and service provision. Below, these themes are summarised in turn.

Firstly, a prevalent theme in interviews was that public-sector workers’ knowledge about and understanding of civil society was seen to have improved in the years covered by this study. This referred to politicians’ and public servants’ awareness that civil society could be seen as its own, separate sector, but also to their understanding of its organisations’ working conditions, how they functioned and what challenges they faced. One national-level civil society respondent suggested that this alleged increased awareness among public servants had helped professionalise collaborations between the sectors. Using their interactions with the local welfare office as an example, they noted:

I regularly attend meetings with the head of social services (...) and I think that we’re both aware of my triple role in that context, that I’m a partner, I’m an entrepreneur and contractor but I’m also a critical voice. (...) And we’ve found a way of working where

815 The period from the initiation of the Agreement process in 2007 until the last interviews were conducted in early 2017.
we’re aware that this is the playing field. He might get angry or frustrated about the criticisms that we raise in our annual report on social services, but he would never question our right to voice them. (…) So I’d say it’s a professional collaboration. (…) It has become more professional, the dialogue between politicians, civil servants and our organisation.816

Similar interpretations were voiced by other public servants and civil society representatives at both national and local level. Yet these positive reports should not be read as an indication that the problems pertaining to a lack of knowledge and understanding of civil society in the public sector had been resolved. As we will see, such misconceptions and misunderstandings continued to be reported by affected actors throughout this study and is one of the themes included in the section on Remaining issues and challenges below.

Secondly, a related reflection made by some actors, again from both sectors, was that public servants were seen to have become not just more aware of what civil society was in terms of its scale, composition and diversity, but also more appreciative of the ways in which its organisations could contribute to decisions and services. One group of interviewees argued that in parts of the public sector at least, civil society was now widely recognised as a valuable resource and partner. This was contrasted with a past where turning to civil society was said to have been done more out of duty than an expectation that their input would be of actual use:

The voluntary sector consists of people who are engaged and who want to make a difference, so it’s rewarding for us, they’re always willing to take part. And that’s what’s new. In the past we’ve seen them as a nuisance, we’ve dutifully put things through a remiss procedure but in practice we haven’t cared about what they responded.817

We clearly feel that the government wants more dialogue now, more exchanges with the sector. At least we’re being listened to.818

A few public servants suggested that involving civil society in decision making was simply what they were expected to do: an established way of working that was now taken for granted by both sides.819 Such claims were made both by public servants from policy areas where involving civil society was a long-standing tradition, and by officials for whom it constituted a more recent way of working. Many agreed that it was now standard practice to see civil society organisations as valued stakeholders in policy-making in the fields of health and social care. The following quote by a national-level respondent illustrates this claim:

816 Interviewee 11, civil society representative, national level, 2011.
817 Interviewee 5, public servant, government department, 2009.
818 Interviewee 1, civil society representative, national level, 2009.
819 E.g. interviewees 2, 5, 14, 27, 31, 33, 52.
There’s no question that we should collaborate, there’s no question that we should engage in dialogue, that there’s a shared interest in taking responsibility for social progress. And I notice the same sentiments among the idea-based organisations – they have become more vocal about wanting to be involved in developing society and welfare.\footnote{Interviewee 2, other, national level, 2016.}

A similar point was made by a public servant in Uppsala, who suggested that civil society organisations were increasingly seen as a valuable resource that required a formalised stake in policy processes:

\textit{That’s a change I think I’ve seen (…) that associations are seen more as a resource and treated with more respect. Even if the types of collaborations we talk about now have always been around, they have maybe become more strategic, more formalised.}\footnote{Interviewee 33, public servant, local level, 2014.}

As noted in chapter six, several of the interviewed actors commented on the significance of the Government having formally acknowledged civil society’s status as a separate sector that filled an important social function. In this, they referred to political speeches\footnote{E.g. Reinfeldt 2006.} and policy documents\footnote{E.g. the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill.} where civil society’s contributions to democracy and public services had been emphasised.\footnote{E.g. interviewees 1, 5, 7, 13, 14, 33, 54, 66.}

\textit{Thirdly}, several actors suggested that there had been a shift in the political visions for civil society in the first decades of the twenty-first century.\footnote{E.g. Gavelin 2011; Johansson 20012; Reuter 2012.} This was seen to form part of a broader shift in how these organisations’ role in relation to public services was perceived by both public bodies and parts of civil society. In the early interviews, this topic was often raised with reference to how the Alliance Government’s ambition to increase the number of nonprofit organisations providing public services was seen to have shaped the Agreement ‘dialogue’ process and the resulting document. As discussed in chapter four, whilst this political agenda may have paved the way for organisations seeking to establish themselves as service providers, it was sharply criticised by those who did not share these ambitions and by those who opposed it on ideological grounds.\footnote{Interviewee 2, other, national level, 2016.} Both interpretations were voiced in this study. In later interviews, however, the tensions between the service and voice agendas appeared toned down. Actors suggested that whilst there remained political differences on what role civil society should play in public service provision, the perception of civil society organisations as necessary partners in solving social problems was no longer as controversial as before and was now spread more evenly across the political spectrum. In the words of one local-level politician:
I’d say that over the past 10 years there has been a change, it’s not just about words but there has been an actual change. Concepts such as social entrepreneurship and voluntary sector and so on, they weren’t as known then as they are now. (…) You notice the force in the voluntary sector more.826

That civil society organisations over some time had been pushed to take on more service contracts was seen to have affected their access to policy making, both in positive and negative ways. The positive effects listed in interviews included that organisations were increasingly seen as partners to the state rather than “merely” grant recipients, and that this gave their voice more weight in decision processes. The negatives included that organisations were becoming dependent on funding tied to policy goals and performance measures. This was seen to risk making them vulnerable financially, as well as undermining their ability to criticise decision makers. Despite this latter risk being addressed in the principles of ‘Autonomy and Independence’ in both the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill, respondents appeared unconvinced that these measures would offer sufficient protection to organisations around the country.

There was little agreement on whether the political parties had different approaches to involving civil society in decision making. In the later interviews, where civil society respondents were asked if they had noticed any difference to involvement practices after the 2014 change of Government, some reported a perceived increase in contacts with Government ministers, while others claimed that the opposite was the case. Public servants were equally divided on this issue. The consensus appeared to be that both governing blocs now tended to emphasise the value of involving civil society in policy processes. Whilst the political blocs may have differed in what types of organisations they were more familiar with or what vocabulary they used to describe them, any differences in working practices were seen to be more a case of personal preferences than party lines.

A couple of actors further speculated that the perceived shift in attitudes to civil society involvement among politicians might be attributed to a generational shift rather than ideological differences. It was suggested that younger politicians were more likely to use a discursive leadership approach and be open to new ways of working. A civil society respondent from a national level organisation explained this line of thinking:

When the Alliance parties came to power the biggest difference was that it brought a generational shift. The social services leadership at the time said the same thing, that perhaps the biggest change wasn’t the political differences between the blocs but a shift in generations, which meant that people [came into power who] thought and worked differently. [It brought] a more inclusive, goal-oriented and modernising leadership, which shifted focus, made people consider new ways of doing things, made them more willing to invite external actors to dialogue.827

826 Interviewee 31, elected representative, local level, 2014.
827 Interviewee 13, civil society representative, national level, 2016.
Finally, another development that was not raised by respondents but which appeared to have occurred during the course of this study was that respondents in later interviews displayed more pragmatic and instrumental attitudes to civil society involvement. In the earlier interviews, conducted as part of the follow-up of the Agreement, a few interviewees displayed a principled attitude about what civil society involvement should look like, citing criteria to do with timing, inclusivity and influence. Such attitudes were less vocalised in the later interviews, where respondents instead appeared more likely to suggest that involvement processes should be functional; designed to meet a specific, policy-related need, rather than any specific democratic criteria.

The introduction of the new thematic consultation forums (sakråd) can serve as an illustration of this possible shift in priorities. The method was designed to allow government decision makers to invite civil society representatives to share their expertise on policy issues on an ad-hoc basis. As long as the organisers of the process are transparent about its purpose and design, and make efforts to build on any previous consultation conducted on the same topic, they can invite civil society representatives at very short notice, invite as many or as few as they like, and set the agenda entirely to suit their own purposes. This might be seen to go against some of the ideas contained in the ‘Dialogue’ principles in the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill, which were in part designed to readjust the balance of power between civil society and the public sector in terms of the timing and agenda-setting of involvement activities.828

Yet when actors discussed this topic in interviews,829 these apparent contradictions were not identified as problematic. Being clear and open about the intent and limitations of the process was seen to be more important than meeting the expectations set in the ‘Dialogue’ principles. In a reflection on how the thematic consultation forum approach had been received, one national-level respondent suggested that the fact that it was designed to deal with pertinent policy issues, actual problems that needed solving, made people want to get involved irrespective of what methods were used. The same person suggested that the new sense of trust between certain civil society organisations and parts of the Government Offices made people less likely to quibble about methods and principles:

I think a sense of trust has been built up. You’re not as suspicious anymore as you were initially, when you didn’t know where this was going and you didn’t know to what degree you supported [the Agreement]. I think that because there is more trust, people are able to handle that.830

828 E.g. the statement that the forms of involvement should be “open, recurrent and characterised by inclusivity”, I2008/2110/UF, p.15.
829 The sakråd model was formally launched in autumn 2016 and the method was only discussed in nine interviews, primarily involving actors with little or no experience of the method.
830 Interviewee 2, other, national level, 2016.
A number of actors also suggested that this pragmatism now extended to how
civil society organisations interacted with each other and with the public sector.
As noted, several respondents from either sector suggested that tensions between
civil society organisations had reduced, and that they had become more profes-
sional in contacts with the public sector. Reflecting on this perceived observa-
tion, one public servant made the following comment:

It’s more professional now, from both sides, I really think so. People aren’t as petulant
anymore if you know what I mean. You have your voice-giving role and you have
your governmental role and you just have to handle that. Which means that you can
have more substantive discussions now than in the past, when there were always
discussions about how you couldn’t bite the hand that feeds you and so on. I think
there’s less of that today, there’s more respect for [civil society’s] independence and
autonomy.

One way of understanding this apparent shift towards a more pragmatic
approach to civil society involvement may be that the first two rounds of
interviews targeted individuals directly affected by the Agreement and took
place when the Agreement negotiations were still fresh in respondents’ minds.
The ‘Dialogue’ principles, at the centre of the reform attempts studied here,
were the product of the overarching discussions about civil society’s role in
relation to the public sector that took place during the Agreement proceedings.
At the time, the Civil Society Bill and the European Code of Good Practice had
recently been launched, new platforms for civil society collaborations had been
set up, and enthusiasm for discussing both involvement methods specifically
and civil society’s circumstances in broader terms, were high among the affected
actors. With time, however, people’s interest in these discussions waned.
Organisations turned their attention back to their core activities, and their
methods of cross-sector interaction became once more seen as a means to an end
rather than an object of ongoing negotiations and developments.

Perceived changes to involvement practices
Throughout this study, there remained a broad consensus among the interviewed
actors that recent years had seen a change in the nature of civil society-public
sector interactions. What these perceived changes were is summarised below, as
more opportunities for involvement; more substantive and considered involve-
ment; better timed involvement; more inclusive involvement (or more competi-
tion for access); and civil society using new strategies to influence public deci-
sions. Again, these themes represent the positive side of the story. A more bal-

831 E.g. interviewees 13, 14, 41, 47, 56.
832 Interviewee 52, public servant, government department, 2016.
833 E.g. Civos and the idea-based organisations coordinating group (Idéburnas samordningsgrupp), both set up in 2009.
anced perspective on this topic can be gauged from also reading the second half of this chapter, which addresses Remaining issues and challenges.

Firstly, the change in involvement practices most frequently reported in interviews was a perceived *increase in opportunities for civil society organisations to influence policy processes*. Three related claims were made on this theme: that the public sector more often invited civil society organisations to give input; that the scope of issues on which their input was requested had broadened; and that there had been a growth in the number of platforms through which organisations could make their voices heard. Examples of such platforms included conferences or working groups set up to facilitate cross-sector collaborations. Within civil society there were new umbrella organisations and networks coordinating lobbying and campaigning activities at local, regional, national and international level. In a 2011 interview, one public servant explained how they saw this change manifested in their department’s work:

> From the perspective of public servants, I can definitely say that the dialogue with the third sector has become more of a given than it used to be. For example, now that we’ve created a new regulation about government grants to organisations, we invited organisations early on to raise their views and we held repeated dialogue about the contents, and we even did the remiss procedure over the summer to ensure that all organisations would be able to submit their views in good time before a decision was due. And this hasn’t happened before. (...) we don’t normally do it with internal regulations, it’s different when it’s a governmental commission. (...) And it’s my perception that it improves the quality of the work, because we receive good input that we can make use of in a completely different way. And that’s a direct result of the Agreement, where we commit to holding dialogue on issues that concern [civil society].

Whilst the perceived increase in involvement opportunities was primarily seen as a positive development, some interviewed actors cautioned that an increase in requests for input from the public sector could inadvertently become a burden for the participating organisations. Thus for some organisations, the reported increase in involvement activities was portrayed as a mixed blessing. Whilst they welcomed the opportunities to give input, they found themselves spread thin between the many different access points on offer.

A couple of civil society representatives further noted that what could be interpreted as more opportunities to influence policy also meant a more complex system to navigate for organisations seeking to do so. There were more issues open for input, more channels available for influencing the public sector and more civil society actors competing to be heard. In the words of a civil society respondent from a national organisation:

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834 E.g. interviewees 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 20, 25, 44, 46, 47, 50, 52, 57, 70.
835 Interviewee 5, public servant, government department, 2011.
836 E.g. interviewees 1, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 36, 39, 49, 53.
The opportunities for giving input have become more complicated. In the past it was easy to learn how to influence [decision making]. There were fewer channels and fewer actors. If you knew how to write a remiss response and you knew your elected representatives and knew how public agencies worked and understood the fiscal year and could write a press release – then you were sorted. But that won’t take you very far today. You need to be visible in all the social media and there are more issues now, more actors to engage with.\textsuperscript{837}

These issues, too, are explored further in the section on \textit{Remaining issues and challenges} below.

\textit{Secondly}, and despite these reservations, a number of respondents in the later interviews suggested that \textit{involvement activities had become more thought through and better organised} in the years covered by this study.\textsuperscript{838} Some saw these perceived improvements as a direct effect of the apparent growth in appreciation for civil society’s input described above. Some of these claims pertained to how the public sector’s involvement initiatives were seen to have become more substantive than before in terms of both intent and content. In the words of one national-level civil society respondent:

\begin{quote}
I do think that civil society is invited more genuinely nowadays (…) That [the public sector] really wants our knowledge and see our needs, and I also think they recognise areas where they need us to find sustainable solutions. (…) These kinds of principles are not intended to be used literally, but I do think that [the public sector] has opened up to more involvement, more listening, more participation. And I often think they make an effort to meet with us on an equal footing.\textsuperscript{839}
\end{quote}

Some actors from both sectors further suggested that the public sector had diversified its methods of involving civil society, that it had become more likely to deviate from the traditional remiss procedure, and that ad-hoc, face-to-face and sometimes more deliberative approaches had become more common. Examples given of new involvement practices were the ‘dialogue’ process through which the \textit{Agreement} had been created, which some participants saw as a new and innovative way of working,\textsuperscript{840} and the more recently created thematic consultation forums (\textit{sakråd}), as described above.

It was also suggested that some public bodies appeared to make an effort to organise civil society’s involvement more strategically. Examples of this included attempts to coordinate civil society involvement better across government departments or among public agencies working with similar target groups.

\textit{Thirdly}, another way in which some actors claimed that civil society’s opportunities for influencing policy processes had improved pertained to their

\textsuperscript{837} Interviewee 6, civil society representative, national level, 2016.
\textsuperscript{838} E.g. interviewees 2, 5, 7, 13, 14, 46, 55, 64, 67, 71.
\textsuperscript{839} Interviewee 7, civil society representative, national level, 2016.
\textsuperscript{840} It should be noted that not all participants agreed with this positive depiction. Criticisms of the \textit{Agreement} process were voiced both in consultation responses and in interviews for this study. Johansson (2011) concluded that only a few elements of the \textit{Agreement} process could be considered new or experimental.
timing. Some of the interviewed actors suggested that civil society organisations were now more frequently invited to comment on issues and plans before they were finalised, thus increasing their chance of actually affecting the outputs. 841

In the words of one national-level public servant:

My sense is that there is a bit more consideration now put into creating genuine opportunities for influence. (...) I’m thinking for example about how they’re working now at Socialstyrelsen842 with their service user council. That they schedule the meetings before a decision is to be made, to increase [participants’] chances of influencing the decision. I think that type of awareness has become more common. (Where do you think that awareness has come from?) I think they consider at least some [civil society] actors more equal. They’re not just odd and annoying, they have insights that [the public sector] wants a part of. 843

Another concrete example of this was how a draft of the Civil Society Bill had been circulated to civil society organisations for comments. This was portrayed as an unusual measure and a step away from standard procedures whereby comments are only invited on the commission report that precedes a bill.

Alongside these positive tales, a number of actors were careful to point out that ill-considered, poorly focused and badly timed involvement initiatives remained a problem in parts of the public sector, topics that are examined later in this chapter. However, the consensus among interviewed actors appeared to be that such practices had become slightly less widespread in recent years, as awareness of good involvement routines had spread within the public sector and civil society had become more vocal in demanding that such processes should adhere to some minimum standards of quality.

Fourthly, another perceived change reported by some of the interviewed actors was that certain public bodies were seen to have become more inclusive in their efforts to involve civil society. 844 Such claims were made in reference to how the ‘dialogue’ processes preceding the national and local Agreements were seen by some to have sought a broader than usual selection of participants, 845 that new movements and networks had emerged and were gaining access to decision makers, and that civil society advisory councils in some places had been loosened up to include new members, or simply been replaced with new involvement forms. This perceived levelling-out of access to decision makers was contrasted with a past where more rigid relationships between fixed, established actors, often with close links to political parties, had dominated the public sector-civil society relationship. One public agency official explained their reasoning for broadening the membership of their advisory council to new organisations and individuals in the following way:

841 E.g. interviewees 5, 20, 26, 28, 34, 50.
842 The National Board of Health and Welfare.
843 Interviewee 56, public servant, government department, 2016.
844 E.g. interviewees 6, 7, 14, 22, 34, 43, 45.
845 A claim that was questioned by some actors. See e.g. Gavelin 2010; Johansson 2011.
We have deviated from what’s normal procedure in [contacts with] the disability rights movement. Typically we’d turn to the big umbrella organisations and they would contact their members who’d say if they were interested in taking part, and then they would select the people who’d represent the movement in public agencies’ patient- and user councils. We’ve taken a different path. We haven’t turned to them. We have selected people ourselves. Both because we wanted a breadth of participants, we know that since they serve two-year terms there’s time for everyone to take part, so we can select individuals depending on what projects we’re working on, what we’re planning for the next few years. And because we want a good geographic spread, gender distribution, age distribution. The first council we had was dominated by older age groups, and we felt that we had to reduce the average age to achieve a better breadth. And we have tried to include others who are not members of the disability rights movement. In those cases we have selected individuals who are competent and who operate in this field, who have a platform without necessarily being members of organisations.

Again, however, the interviews revealed considerable variation both in the selection methods reported and in affected actors’ interpretations of them. Not all public bodies represented in this study had made any attempt to widen their networks in civil society. Some suggested that doing so might upset their existing relationships with civil society organisations. Where attempts had been made to change how invitees were selected, not all perceived them to have been successful.

Fifthly, and lastly, interviewed actors also suggested that civil society organisations were using new strategies to influence public decisions. A few civil society representatives explained that placing more focus on policy work had been a conscious strategy for their organisations in recent years. One respondent claimed that doing so had raised their organisation’s profile and had given them better access to national-level decision makers:

We’re an organisation whose main purpose is to help individuals or groups of individuals. And we’ve [traditionally] put very little effort into advocacy work. But since six or eight years back we have chosen to put more of our resources into advocacy and campaigning. (And that’s made a difference?) Yes absolutely. We’ve made a bigger mark in national media and people have become more aware of our work, and people’s trust in us has increased. I think we’re considered very knowledgeable. That we don’t just present our own case but represent our interest group. And since we address legislation and national strategies, we get to meet Government ministers.

This shift in priorities for certain civil society organisations was also brought up in public sector interviews, where some public servants observed that civil society organisations in recent years had become more professional in their inter-

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846 Interviewee 63, public servant, national public agency, 2017.
847 E.g. interviewees 5, 7, 13, 14, 36, 30, 33, 36, 37, 43, 46, 66.
848 Interviewee 13, civil society representative, national level, 2016.
actions with the public sector. One public servant observed that civil society organisations appeared to show more skills in their efforts to influence policy. This was exemplified by how they were seen to format their inputs better to make them more likely to be used:

Civil society has become more professional (…) If I circulate a draft proposal and the responses just say “we think this or that perspective is interesting” [I can’t use that.] They need to understand my craft, somehow, to be able to influence. They need to use track changes and change the document. That’s how negotiations happen, you offer an alternative argument that needs to be specific for people to understand it, you can’t just write general, fluffy sentences about what you think. Nobody will listen to that. And that’s how I think it’s become more professional, that those who are most affected understand that and can make those sorts of contributions. But perhaps that’s more to do with resources.849

Another example of how civil society organisations were reported to have become more professional in interactions with the public sector was that they were said to appear less competitive with each other and less likely to focus solely on their own issues in contacts with the public sector. Instead, they were said to use different fora for different issues, showing a willingness to rise above their core concerns when the situation called for it. As the above quote implies, however, and as was also pointed out by others, the drawback of this alleged professionalisation of certain organisations’ policy work was that it raised the bar for other organisations, too. This risked putting those who lacked the resources or know-how to do the same at a disadvantage.

On the topic of the strategies used by civil society organisations to influence decision makers, several of the interviewed actors further observed that civil society organisations appeared to collaborate more today than in the past.850 Examples of this included the establishment of formal, ongoing collaborations, such as the umbrella organisations Civos and Famma, still relatively new when the early interviews took place. Another example was the coordinating group (Idéburnas samordningsgrupp, SOG) that had been set up in the wake of the Agreement process. Other examples were more ad-hoc collaborations – for example when organisations came together to jointly lobby the Government around shared concerns. These collaborations were primarily brought up as a positive development, a more effective way of working, and a source of new relationships with organisations working in related fields. It was suggested that the apparent growth in collaborations among civil society organisations had helped build their confidence, something that was seen to have strengthened the sector as a whole in interactions with the public sector.

849 Interviewee 56, public servant, government department, 2016.
850 E.g. interviewees 2, 5, 6, 7, 13, 16, 17, 18, 36, 41, 44, 45, 46, 47, 53.
Some interviewed actors also pointed to how Swedish civil society organisations, boosted by their access to European networks and the Swedish academic community taking a new interest in their existence, were seen to have become more self-reflective in recent years. They were seen to be more inclined to perceive themselves as part of a sector and to question and reflect on its role in society, both internally, with colleagues in the sector and with the government. In the words of one national-level civil society respondent:

The fact that we actually created a number of new umbrella organisations that started to initiate and make use of research, draw on research, do our own studies, campaign… If you look at Almedalen 10, 12 years ago it was almost only the unions, the business sector and the public sector that were there. Civil society was very poorly represented. Last year half of the 2,200 seminars in Almedalen were run by civil society. And like I said, the fact that there are a lot of voices addressing these shared challenges and [they] don’t accept a situation where politicians aren’t able to take a stand on this is one of the reasons why these issues have grown.

As will be explored below, however, a few respondents pointed out that the creation of such platforms could be experienced as an additional barrier between individual organisations and public decision makers. This was said to risk making it more difficult for individual organisations, particularly those representing minority perspectives, to be heard.

Questioning change

However, not all of the interviewed actors agreed that civil society’s opportunities to influence decision making had changed in the ways suggested above. Nor were they all in agreement that the changes they had observed were for the better. A few respondents from both sectors pointed out that their fields of work had been characterised by a close working relationship between the public sector and civil society for a long time. Recent attempts to reform involvement practices were not seen to have affected them noticeably. Disability policy, elderly policy, HIV prevention and drug policy were all areas where civil society involvement was portrayed as a taken-for-granted, long-standing tradition. The following quotes, from public servants at a public agency and a government department respectively, illustrate these arguments:

We have a national HIV-strategy where it’s clearly stated in detail how it should be done. I think it’s been acknowledged from the outset that this can’t be done without civil society. (…) Sure it changes, but not much. The forms might change a little bit.
I can only speak from my own experience and the assignments I’ve had over these years, but I’d say there’s sometimes been a lot [of civil society involvement] and sometimes less. It’s hard to say if it depends on anything other than the requirements of each situation.856

Any changes in involvement levels observed in these areas were attributed to fluctuations in policy makers’ need for input. Often, any noted improvements were attributed to lessons drawn from their own experiences, rather than any centrally organised attempts to reform involvement practices.

7.3 Remaining issues and challenges

Alongside the largely positive changes to attitudes and civil society practices that actors claimed to have observed, they also pointed to a number of remaining issues and challenges said to affect the reform ideas’ implementation or civil society’s ability to influence decision making more broadly. The following pages summarise these findings.

Involvement as window-dressing

The most common complaint raised in interviews was that attempts to involve civil society organisations in policy making still all too frequently lacked a clear purpose or any meaningful potential for influence.857 Respondents from both sectors reported instances of public bodies appearing to make ceremonial submissions to the involvement norm or the reform ideas.858 This was manifested as meetings held for the sake of holding a meeting, public servants making a show of listening to civil society’s contributions without making use of them and failing to explain why, and ‘dialogue’ processes conducted as box-ticking exercises to give departments something to report back on in the annual survey of civil society consultations. On this theme, a local civil society representative remarked that they sometimes felt that the local authority involved them to “ease their conscience” and to be able to say that they had the pensioners’ support for an issue.859 It was also suggested that public bodies adapted the labels of involvement activities to demonstrate adherence to internal steering documents. As expressed by one local-level civil society representative:

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856 Interviewee 62, public servant, government department, 2017.
857 E.g. interviewees 7, 14, 26, 27, 32, 33, 37, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 45, 48, 52, 53, 56, 62, 68, 69.
859 Interviewee 37, civil society representative, local level, 2014.
Sometimes I think they just use the [dialogue] term because it says in the steering documents that they should engage in dialogue with citizens and organisations. “How many dialogue meetings have you had?” “I’ve had four.” Because they’ve had a meeting, and so they call it dialogue.860

A few of the interviewed actors suggested that the statements that public servants made about their involvement activities at times were exaggerated to the point of deception.861 These claims were made by actors from both sectors. As an example, a civil society interviewee in Uppsala recounted an occasion when they claimed that local authority officials had falsely stated that they had held ‘dialogue’ meetings with them:

[Officials] have stated that we have had dialogue meetings with them, even though we haven’t. And that’s been revealed to us when we’ve been in direct contact with politicians. So we’ve understood that the civil servants have given false information about us having been involved. And of course that’s upsetting to us in the voluntary sector, that we’re not included in the creation of such an important document, which affects us too.862

Actors observed that these window-dressing practices – by some dismissed as instances of “sham democracy” (skendemokrati)864 – over time diminished the willingness of civil society organisations to take part in the public sector’s involvement activities. One civil society respondent from a national organisation described how repeated experiences of giving time to activities that in hindsight had had little impact, had forced them to become more selective in when and how they gave time to public sector invitations:

We’re not going to sit down to another meeting with some civil servant from some Government department, we’re sitting there 20 secretary-generals from large organisations and some public servant comes along to tell us that they can’t say yet how our financing is going to change. It gave a really strong feeling that they were just ticking off that they’d had consultation meetings with civil society.865

Equally, repeated experiences of poorly thought-through or ceremonial involvement activities was said to negatively affect public sector staff morale, over time reducing officials’ willingness to continue engaging civil society in their work.

These alleged window-dressing tendencies in the public sector can be interpreted as a consequence of the symbolic and broadly positive connotations of the reform ideas in conjunction with their fashionable status. The former

860 Interviewee 45, civil society representative, local level, 2014.
861 E.g. interviewees 7, 27, 33, 38, 42, 56.
862 Interviewee 42, civil society representative, local level, 2014.
863 Christensen & Laegreid 2007; Oliver 1991.
864 Interviewee 6, civil society representative, national level, 2009; Interviewee 27, state secretary, national level, 2016.
865 Interviewee 26, civil society representative, national level, 2016.
point is exemplified by the alleged over-enthusiastic usage of the ‘dialogue’ label by public bodies, particularly in the first years of this study. This sentiment was confirmed by several respondents who noted that public sector-civil society ‘dialogue’ had become seen as intrinsically good, irrespective of how the term was applied.\textsuperscript{866} Thus for a public body, declaring that they were engaging in ‘dialogue’ with civil society was said to signal that they were open to external influence and willing to experiment with new and more inclusive working practices; both desirable qualities by public administration norms at the time. In the words of one local-level civil society representative:

Like I said, dialogue is a fashionable word. Dialogue and consultation are those kinds of buzzwords that you’d like to include, so you throw them around whenever you can, it becomes a case of if you’ve met someone so you call it a dialogue, even if that’s not quite the case. The steering documents tell them to call it dialogue so … there are these constant buzzwords that you use in the authority.\textsuperscript{867}

On a related note, one local civil society representative referred to the risk that ‘dialogue’ became seen as a cure-all solution, a tendency he described as highly problematic.\textsuperscript{868} Another civil society representative from a national organisation remarked:

Dialogue has an inherent value, you know you’re supposed to consider it a positive. So you write that you’re going to hold a dialogue but what that means in practice is another matter, we can list many examples where the dialogue has been too thin, too stiff and so on, to function well.\textsuperscript{869}

However, most interviewed actors did not suggest that public officials tended to be intentionally deceptive in their seemingly careless usage of the ‘dialogue’ label. Rather, they assumed that many individuals in both sectors simply used ‘dialogue’ as an umbrella term for all types of interaction between the sectors, unaware or unconcerned that it was understood in some circles to have a distinct meaning. That public sector workers lacked the skills or resources to design meaningful involvement activities was also brought up as a reason; a theme explored further below.

Some respondents interpreted the window-dressing tendency as an indication that the reform agenda was little more than a temporary fad. Noting the current popularity of the ‘dialogue’ concept, they drew parallels to related terms that had been similarly fashionable in the past and had then become used less over time. In the words of one public servant from Uppsala local authority:

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{866} E.g. interviewee 2, 8, 33, 43, 45, 48, 49.
\textsuperscript{867} Interviewee 45, civil society representative, local level, 2014.
\textsuperscript{868} Interviewee 48, civil society representative, local level, 2014.
\textsuperscript{869} Interviewee 43, civil society representative, national level, 2014.
\end{flushleft}
For a while collaboration was the watchword: we were supposed to collaborate, and so we went to meetings and nobody understood what we were supposed to collaborate on. And it’s the same now when you invite people to dialogue meetings without a purpose, it turns into dialogue for its own sake and eventually you lose interest. It isn’t used as a strategic instrument.

This quote exemplifies the negative light in which the fashionable status of the reform ideas was portrayed in interviews.

Respondents in this study suggested that the very fact that these ideas and practices were considered fashionable encouraged public bodies to assume a less critical approach to them. It was suggested that this had led public bodies to embrace new involvement practices without sufficient consideration of whether the new approaches could fully replace the functions performed by the old, discarded methods. One civil society respondent exemplified this by describing an occasion when the existing local pensioners’ council had been sidelined in favour of a citizen participation event, which had attracted only a small number of participants:

They’d called a citizen dialogue about how pensioners’ problems can be solved through technology (…) There were 25 people there, of which eight were politicians and seven were civil servants. So there weren’t more than 11 or 12 [citizens]. But on paper it looks good, that this is something they’ve been discussing with the pensioners. (…) Instead of involving KPR872 who represents 19,000 local residents (…) They look for ways for politicians to connect, but they don’t use the routes already in place.

This alleged tendency to a conceptual stretching of the ‘dialogue’ label can arguably be linked to the vague phrasing of the original reform texts. Whilst the lack of shared definitions of key terms such as ‘dialogue’ may have broadened the reform agenda’s appeal, enabling organisations to interpret and adopt it to fit their needs and abilities, a risk associated with this lack of clarity was that the reform ideas could become stretched to the point of meaninglessness.

Non-existent or badly timed involvement

Another issue raised in interviews was that civil society organisations still felt excluded from certain decision processes where they had expected the opportunity to contribute. An example of this, provided by a national-level civil society respondent, was how the Swedish Employment Agency (Arbetsförmedlingen) had failed to consult civil society organisations on the

870 Interviewee 33, public servant, local level 2014.
871 The scepticism that interviewed actors displayed when discussing fashionable ideas and practices thus mirrored the assumptions for which the fashion analogy in organisational theory has been criticised: that organisational fashions are inherently temporary and superficial. See e.g. Czarniawska 2011; Revik 2011.
872 The local pensioners’ council (kommunala pensionärsrådet).
873 Interviewee 37, civil society representative, local level, 2014.
874 E.g. interviewees 7, 13, 25, 29, 39, 42, 43, 45, 53, 56.
875 Interviewee 25, civil society representative, national level, 2011.
dismantling of a much debated labour market scheme, Fas 3,⁸⁷⁶ in which civil society organisations had played a significant part as service providers. This omission was portrayed as a contravention of the Government’s commitments to ‘dialogue’ made in the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill. Another civil society representative expressed frustration that local policy makers rarely involved civil society in strategic discussions, despite the numerous handbooks and other guidance available on how this could be done.⁸⁷⁷

A related complaint was that when involvement opportunities were offered, their timing was still sometimes seen to be poorly chosen.⁸⁷⁸ This was typically because the decision to be addressed had already been made or because the boundaries of what was up for consultation were seen as too narrowly defined by the initiating body. And whilst interviewed actors were largely positively disposed to the remiss procedure as a form of influence, it was suggested that relying on written consultations alone for civil society input – still common practice in parts of the public sector – was insufficient. Doing so meant that input from civil society organisations was reduced to reacting to the public sector’s proposals, rather than contributing to shaping them or alerting decision makers to perspectives or issues that could have been taken into account. One civil society representative from a national umbrella organisation made the following remark on this theme:

If it's going to have an impact you need to hold the dialogue very early, so to respond to a remiss is too late really. In that sense it can [make a difference] to take part in a commission, to submit ideas, but we also sometimes propose new commissions. (…) We do [respond to remiss procedures], but it’s too late to set the agenda. It’s more a case of reacting, spotting potential impacts that the commissioners haven’t noted, consequences for civil society and so on.⁸⁷⁹

Also brought up as problematic was that civil society involvement was seen to be poorly coordinated between different sections of the public sector. It was not unusual for civil society organisations in a relatively short space of time to be invited to several consultations on the same or closely related topics, by different public agencies or government departments. Such examples of parallel efforts were portrayed as a waste of time and resources both for the initiating bodies and the invited organisations.

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⁸⁷⁶ Fas 3 refers to the last phase in a three-step labour market policy package introduced in 2007. In this final phase, people in long-term unemployment were expected to work for an organisation allocated by the Employment Agency. The client would receive unemployment benefit and the organisation providing the work would receive remuneration from the Government. Many Fas 3-positions were provided by civil society organisations. Following critique against the programme, the Social Democratic-Green Party coalition Government commenced its dismantling in 2016.

⁸⁷⁷ Interviewee 13, civil society representative, national level, 2016.

⁸⁷⁸ E.g. interviewees 6, 13, 40, 43, 44, 53, 59, 67.

⁸⁷⁹ Interviewee 53, civil society representative, national level, 2016.
Lack of awareness of the need for reform

A few actors further expressed frustration that despite the importance of civil society involvement having been emphasised in the Agreement, the Civil Society Bill and elsewhere, the message had not trickled down to all levels of the public sector or had failed to translate into practical changes. That many public servants still did not see the value of reviewing their involvement practices or lacked the know-how to design effective processes and incorporate civil society’s input into their work, were brought up by a number of the interviewed actors from both sectors as enduring obstacles to the reform agenda having a meaningful impact.

As outlined in chapter five, there were different reasons why the reform ideas might not appeal to target audiences. Among civil society representatives, some organisations were simply content with their existing relations with decision makers and did not see a need for reform. One public servant remarked that where relations between a public body and civil society were well established, there was less incentive for the reform ideas to be translated into practical changes, as doing so could risk upsetting relations with the organisations they already had a close working relationship with. This comment was made in response to a question about whether their department benefited from the information shared in the Government’s interdepartmental working group on civil society relations:

We haven’t got a lot out of [the interdepartmental working group] since the organisations in these two fora are so driven, so the notion that we would initiate a change is problematic in itself.

Other public servants, too, suggested that changing their involvement practices or the organisations represented on their advisory councils was not their decision to make; any such initiatives must come from their civil society constituents. And whilst many civil society organisations were indeed vocal in demanding changes to involvement practices, others remained sceptical. Again, this was particularly the case among organisations with well-established relations to decision makers, who did not see the need to change the status quo. They were used to having regular contacts with government ministers and senior civil servants, through their membership on advisory councils and through their personal networks, and claimed not to have been noticeably affected by attempts to reform the modes of involvement.

The significant variation in awareness and interest – what might be described as an uneven internal representation of the reform ideas in the studied settings

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880 E.g. interviewees 2, 13, 20, 26, 38, 44, 52, 56, 62, 63, 67, 69.
881 See section 5.3 Affected actors’ attitudes to the reform ideas.
882 Interviewee 58, public servant, government department, 2016.
883 E.g. interviewees 37, 55, 59.
can thus be attributed both to differences between organisations, units and policy areas, and to differences in the affected individuals’ disposition and priorities. Some of the interviewed actors suggested that differences in attitudes to civil society involvement between departments could be explained by the focus of their policy field and how directly it affected individual citizens.\textsuperscript{885} Policy areas that directly addressed the needs of specific interest groups were seen to be more likely to have established relationships with civil society, in particular where those interests were well represented by interest organisations.

At times, differences between units were explained with reference to the professional and personal backgrounds of the staff and leadership. Certain professional groups were mentioned as less likely to consider civil society involvement an important part of their job description than others.\textsuperscript{886} Perhaps unsurprisingly, officials and elected representatives who themselves had a background in civil society were considered more likely to see the value of involving its organisations in policy processes than those who did not.

However, even in policy fields with a strong and vocal civil society constituency, officials claimed to sometimes be discouraged from interacting with its organisations. This suggests that differences in attitudes and practices are also a function of the culture within the unit or department and the priorities of its leadership.\textsuperscript{887} On this subject, a public servant described the difference they had experienced when moving between units within the same government department:

I experience a big difference here compared to my old unit. (...) There was a lot more freedom there to plan your work in different ways. This unit is very industrial in its production. Everything else is considered an extra: what does it offer and how much time does it take? (...) I think the cultures are different in different units, and as long as there isn’t a clear message from the leadership, which is the only thing that counts here really, it just isn’t something we prioritise.\textsuperscript{888}

That civil society involvement remained the concern of a limited number of public servants, often with a personal interest in or responsibility for these activities, thus appears to be an enduring impediment to the reform’s wider implementation. It was seen as particularly problematic when this lack of interest was found at the political level, since political steers were seen as an important factor in the successful implementation of the reform – a topic discussed further below.

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\textsuperscript{885} E.g. Interviewees 61 and 66.
\textsuperscript{886} Legal professionals were among the groups considered less interested in civil society involvement.
\textsuperscript{887} C.f. Greenwood et al. 2010; Oliver 1991; Pache & Santos 2010.
\textsuperscript{888} Interviewee 56, public servant, government department, 2016.
Lack of skills or capacity

Interviewed actors further pointed out that some of the changes promoted in the reform texts put high expectations on public servants’ skills and, some suggested, their personality. Officials were expected to not only to be open to incorporating external input in their work, but also to have the ability to manage complex involvement processes and the people-skills required to communicate with a broad range of participants from different organisations and backgrounds. One public servant from a government department described the challenges this could pose for officials:

It’s about what type of person you are, because it can be a bit scary – if you’re an introverted bureaucrat who’s used to sitting in your office writing on your own and prefer not to answer the phone, it’s quite tricky. I think there needs to be room for all types of people here. And that’s part of what’s difficult, that there is no use in a person like that being forced to run dialogue processes, but at the same time there might just be the one person. It’s a slimmed organisation, so there’s only one person dealing with that issue. So you’re supposed to be a good writer, to know the legislation, but you also need to understand things such as equality issues. And I don’t think you find all of that in every person.

These challenges were said to be exacerbated when involvement activities dealt with sensitive subjects or involved ongoing contacts with adversarial participants. Indeed, the risk of proceedings becoming conflicted and difficult to manage was brought up as a common fear among public servants charged with running involvement processes. The following quote by a government public servant illustrates how these concerns were vocalised in interviews:

You really need to be secure in your role as a civil servant to be able to maintain these contacts, you need to know that this is my role as a civil servant, that’s the politicians’ role and that’s civil society’s role, and to be comfortable in those discussions. And sometimes as a civil servant you need to defend the Government’s politics, and that can be hard if you’re not very senior.

Another national-level respondent commented that elected representatives, too, needed to show a genuine interest in incorporating external perspectives:

If you really want to make use of civil society in a serious way you need a certain room for manoeuvre as a civil servant. And equally in politics, there needs to be an openness to or acceptance of taking part in these kinds of discussions and explorations to find new solutions and new ways of doing things.

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889 This and other obstacles to civil society organisations playing a meaningful role in decision making are also raised in SOU 2016:13 Palett för ett stärkt civilsamhälle, in particular in section 4.2 Hinder för civilsamhällets roll i demokratin.
890 Interviewee 56, public servant, government department, 2016.
891 Interviewee 62, public servant, government department, 2016.
892 Interviewee 2, other, national level, 2016.
Moreover, as suggested here, apart from leaders and officials needing to be open to review their working methods, the systems in which they worked must also contain a degree of flexibility to accommodate any adjustments to working practices required by the reform. Making civil society involvement more inclusive and interactive was seen as a resource-intensive way of working. The sheer effort involved could make public bodies reluctant to deviate from more established approaches such as the remiss procedure or limited interactions with small groups of familiar organisations.

Lack of understanding of civil society’s circumstances

A number of actors further suggested that the seemingly patchy implementation of the reform ideas was symptomatic of how many public servants still lacked a good understanding of civil society’s composition and working conditions. It was argued that many public servants remained poorly informed about how civil society organisations’ democratic set-up and internal decision-making processes affected their ability to respond to public sector calls for input, especially when these involved tight timescales. That many organisations had staff or members with particular needs that might hamper their ability to engage with large materials or take part in formal meetings was also mentioned as an issue that public servants did not always show sufficient sensitivity to.

One civil society respondent from a national organisation expressed this problem as follows:

It’s both a case of a lack of knowledge in the sense of them being poorly informed about how the organisations work. I mean the time it takes to run an internal democratic process and so on. And the lack of knowledge may also pertain to not understanding that not everyone you’re meeting has a degree and what that means. So there’s a lack of knowledge, but there’s also a lack of respect. There are a lot of people who think that if the organisations want to influence they need to adapt and take what’s offered.

On a related note, it was pointed out that some public servants did not pay sufficient attention to the demands that involvement activities put on already stretched civil society organisations, many of which were staffed in part or entirely by volunteers. On this topic, one civil society representative interviewed in 2009 reported that after the Agreement, their organisation had become inundated with requests for contributions or collaborations from government departments and public agencies; demands that were putting a strain on its already limited resources. Other civil society actors, too, noted that whilst they welcomed the apparent growth in interest in their points of view, quantity should

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not be confused with quality in this context. Not all new opportunities to interact with decision makers were considered meaningful. One civil society respondent made this point in a comment on a departmental ‘dialogue’ process in which their organisation had taken part:

They have so much time in the public sector that they’re careless with it. They think it’s totally fine for civil society to allocate 200 people for four hours. It’s totally fine for civil society not to spend that time on their core issues but instead to sit [at a government department], being poorly facilitated. And then there was supposed to be a follow-up meeting and we received the materials for that meeting the same morning. And we were expected to give another four hours but nobody had had time to read, so there was no input. (…) So that type of forum I’d say we take part in less and less, you can see that it’s completely meaningless. It’s better then to just give the state secretary a call.

Again, it was emphasised that involvement activities designed without sufficient consideration of the needs and circumstances of the participating organisations risked doing more damage than good, by undermining relations between the sectors.

**Poorly thought-through follow-up measures**

As noted, frustration at how public servants were seen to pander to fads in working practices and the demands of leaders and evaluators were widespread among the interviewed actors. As hinted in chapter six, these tendencies may in part be attributed to the auditing methods allegedly used to measure how public bodies fared in connection with the ‘Dialogue’ principles in the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill. A number of actors suggested that the use of quantitative measures that did not clearly differentiate between different involvement approaches encouraged public bodies to overstate their achievements and did little to promote good practice. In the words of one national-level civil society representative:

It’s not good enough when we say that the dialogue isn’t working, it’s not in accordance with the Agreement, and the government departments respond that they’ve had 1,600 meetings in a year. Is that an indication that the involvement work is functioning well? We’re not so sure. We think you need to use completely different measures to find that out.

That public servants sometimes exaggerated their involvement activities or put labels such as ‘dialogue’ on them in order to conform to expectations from lead-
ers and auditors, was reported by civil society representatives and public servants alike and was raised at both the national and local levels. A national public servant gave the following example of how an inefffectual involvement activity had been made to sound more impressive in an audit report:

I have been involved in [an initiative] where I felt that this is just done to tick a box. There’s no interest in making use of what’s being said, or have a proper process. So I’ve reacted later when I’ve seen that inflated [in an audit report] as an example of what’s been done, when my sense was that it wasn’t anything really. But I guess it still needs to be reported.902

These reflections concur with the conclusion drawn by public administration scholars, that quantitative performance measures often lead to public organisations adapting their working activities – or their reporting of them – to what is being measured. Sometimes, this means that other goals or values become sidelined, with potentially detrimental effects for social outcomes.903

Indeed, interviewed actors suggested that as a result of the alleged over-emphasis on quantitative follow-up measures and a lack of repercussions for failing to meet the ideals presented in the ‘Dialogue’ principles and elsewhere, there was little incentive for public servants to invest the considerable time and resources required to conform to the reform ideas. A few respondents from both the public sector and civil society thus called for a reconsideration of how the reform ideas were followed up and what measures of success were used.904 One local-level public servant explained their line of thinking as follows:

I don’t think we’re subjected to any form of follow-up, neither quantitative or qualitative. (...) Steering should mean that if we submit some half-hearted responses somebody who posed the questions should respond that this isn’t good enough. You have to improve, you’ll have to allocate more resources or get training or whatever. I want you to show us a better result next time. But it doesn’t work like that, nothing happens, it doesn’t cost anything. We might as well have said that we haven’t done anything at all.905

As mentioned, a few public servants drew comparisons to the gender equality agenda or the children’s or disability rights agendas, which were seen to have been implemented more effectively and had thereby had a more notable impact on government working practices.906 It was suggested that this was a result of the resources spent on training public servants on these perspectives, but also the fact that a failure to consider them in policy processes had consequences – even if these mainly consisted of a telling off from the respective rights teams. A national public servant described the disparity between the different agendas:

902 Interviewee 56, public servant, government department, 2016.
903 Bevan & Hood 2006; Lindgren 2008, ch. 6.
904 E.g. interviewee 38, 43, 45, 56.
905 Interviewee 38, public servant, local level, 2014.
906 E.g. interviewees 27, 52, 56, 58.
The penny needs to drop for individual civil servants about what this means for it to become a natural component of their work. And for some it has and for others it hasn’t. (...) Around civil society I’d say that there’s nobody telling you off. Gender equality has been taken a step further. We’ve got the message that this is a feminist government, there’s a gender equality unit and there are more sanctions built into that model than there is with civil society. For that, I don’t think there are any.907

Thus, whilst affected actors did not suggest that the reform should be legally enforced, a few argued that more considered auditing measures, using better defined criteria and involving some level of sanction for non-compliance, would enable a more effective implementation of this agenda. This, it was hoped, might lead to a reduction in ceremonial conformity to the reform ideas.

Inadequate political steering

The reform ideas were intended to apply to a wide range of policy areas, public bodies, departments and units, each with a different understanding of and relationship with civil society. Populating them were individuals whose own values, backgrounds and job descriptions contributed to shaping their personal attitudes to the reform ideas. Coordinating implementation efforts across such different settings was portrayed as a significant challenge for the reform agenda, and one to which not enough thought and resources were said to have been allocated.908

A few actors, from both sectors and speaking at both the local and the national level, expressed disappointment that the studied reform initiatives had not sustained the political backing they considered necessary to ensure a wider implementation.909 Hence, just like political steers, communicated through budget decisions, policy documents and the talk and actions of elected representatives were portrayed in chapter six as important drivers behind the reform ideas spreading between organisations, so a lack of political backing was seen as a significant obstacle to them catching hold within organisations.

Access and representativity

As outlined in chapter five, inequalities in civil society organisations’ access to decision-making structures was portrayed as one of the original motivations for reforming the modes of involvement. This dilemma was said to have been exacerbated by a purported increase in the number of civil society organisations active in the fields of health and social care. In particular smaller, less formal organisations and networks were said to have grown in number.910 In interviews, civil society respondents commented that the increase in new organisations and

907 Interviewee 56, public servant, government department, 2016.
908 E.g. interviewees 7, 16, 38, 52.
909 E.g. interviewees 7, 27, 52, 56.
networks meant that there were now more actors competing for access, making
it more difficult for individual organisations to make their voices heard.911 From
a public sector perspective, a couple of public servants reported that the large
numbers of active organisations made it difficult for them to identify and reach
all affected stakeholders.912 The fact that many of the new actors were loosely
formed networks, often internet-based and with fluctuating membership and
activity levels, was presented as particularly challenging:

The new types of organisations are perhaps not established organisations but more
networks, internet based. International networks that cater to patients with similar
needs. And that means there’s no one there for us to call, to come see us. It is sort of a
risk for future democratic processes, that the networks are changing shape.913

Yet there were no simple measures for solving these issues. Addressing one
source of inequality, such as restricted access, by broadening an invitation to
more organisations, served only to highlight another dimension of this problem:
that many civil society organisations remained unable to take part on an equal
footing due to inherent disadvantages such as their geographic location or a
shortage of staff or resources.

In a 2011 interview, one government public servant described how they
struggled to handle the large number of organisations, all with different interests
and agendas, that were active in their policy fields:

The problem is that when you’re conducting a dialogue with civil society at national
level there are hundreds of organisations, and it’s impossible to invite them all. It’s
really tricky. You’d wish that there was some kind of representativity, a door in, that
the sector itself took responsibility for their internal communications. But my
impression is that a lot of people are in conflict with each other, that there is a lot of
distrust. There’s no easy way to hold a dialogue actually, and that’s a problem.914

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the period covered by this study saw a num-
ber of attempts to overcome these issues through the establishment of new civil
society platforms, umbrella organisations, networks and working groups to bring
organisations in related fields together and help coordinate their policy work.
Yet not all welcomed these new structures. It was pointed out that while such
platforms might make it easier for public servants to manage their contacts with
civil society, from the organisations’ perspective they could be experienced as
an additional barrier between them and decision makers.915 This risked making it
harder for individual organisations to get their message across:

911 E.g. interviewees 1, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 36, 39, 49, 53.
912 E.g. interviewees 5, 14, 35, 54, 66, 70.
913 Interviewee 63, public servant, national public agency, 2016.
914 Interviewee 5, public servant, government department, 2011.
915 E.g. interviewees 6, 17, 31.
It was really noticeable a few years back, this tendency towards creating different networks and collaborations. It makes it more difficult to speak with your own voice, because a lot of the time a group of organisations are invited to participate through just the one representative.916

Others remarked that the new structures had a tendency to become time-consuming and riddled with internal conflicts, or that there were simply too many of them – creating more work and, sometimes, an unnecessary duplication of efforts.917

Meanwhile, measures put in place by the public sector to bring a more diverse range of perspectives into a policy process – by holding open hearings or specifically targeting individual activists or smaller networks – were welcomed by some but questioned by others as pseudo-democratic, unrepresentative or as less effective channels for influence.918 Two officials from different public agencies explained the complexities in trying to maintain constructive and open relations with both the established umbrella organisations and newer, unaffiliated groups:

A few organisations have chosen not to be a part of these umbrella organisations and that makes it harder to invite them all. (…) and the umbrella organisations are annoyed that these outsiders do not want to participate along with the others. So we decided to make everything open. On our website we put up meeting agendas and notes and we have a direct contact link to which they can send contributions and affect what’s to be discussed in a council.919

Everyone has a right to be heard. For example we’re currently doing a review of government grants and we’re going to have a mailbox for inputs, we’re going to do a web survey, we’re going to hold hearings. But the patient and user movements are representing others; those who attend are representatives, and it’s important that there is that representation and that it’s democratically structured. We don’t invite newly formed organisations just like that. (…) For us to make use of a consultation we need to know that it’s representative.920

Again, a few respondents emphasised that any attempt to replace established advisory councils and remiss procedures with new and purportedly more inclusive involvement methods required different skills and more planning on the part of those running the process, to ensure that the new methods remained a meaningful channel for influence. If not, these involvement activities risked becoming a diluted form of involvement; reaching more organisations, perhaps,
but reducing their potential for having an impact. One public servant expressed these concerns as follows:

Organisational involvement is a bit double-sided I think. Because even though there’s been a trend in health care towards more opportunities to influence, there have also been cases where they’ve got rid of a patient or user council and replaced it with a hearing at departmental level. So instead of involving organisations in working groups you might have a one-off hearing to gather input. They're not involved throughout the processes. So that’s a bit double-sided, at departmental and public-agency level, that not everything is moving in the direction of more influence, there are also different forms of influence which might not have the same weight and impact.921

That any discussion about civil society’s involvement in decision making brought questions about access and representativity to the fore was thus clear. These dilemmas were raised throughout the course of this study and remained as pressing in the last round of interviews as they appeared to have been in the discussions leading up to the Agreement, 10 years previously.922 As illustrated by the above accounts, there was little agreement on how they should be solved. Those who favoured continued efforts to replace or complement advisory boards and remiss procedures with more inclusive or interactive involvement methods, tended to reiterate the need for training and resources on the part of the organising bodies, to ensure that any new approaches retained meaningful prospects for influence. The same points, in other words, that were made in the reform texts analysed in chapter five. A discussion about the democratic implications of these dilemmas continues in chapter eight.

Strained relations

As described in the first half of this chapter, a number of the interviewed actors suggested that relations among civil society organisations and between civil society and the public sector had taken a positive turn in the period covered by this study. Yet this was not everybody’s experience. A few of the interviewed actors recounted stories of involvement processes marred by strained relations and conflicting agendas, either among the participating organisations or between participants and organisers. Such conflicts placed high demands on the skills of process facilitators, who were often public servants without training in either facilitation skills or conflict management.

In one case, a public agency official explained that they had made a decision to close down a civil society advisory board as a result of relations between participants and officials breaking down. The official described the decision as having been made in part to protect their staff members, but also because the board was seen to have become unconstructive and no longer filling its function:

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921 Interviewee 63, public servant, national public agency, 2017.
922 See also SOU 2016:13, sections 4.2 and 5.3.2.
When it comes to [this particular] council, one of the reasons we did not want to continue with the meetings was that it was so unpleasant because the organisations were so hot-headed and aggressive in their approach. One of the reasons it was closed down was out of consideration for our staff. It’s not pleasant to attend meetings where you’re always met with such an unpleasant tone. It doesn’t lead anywhere. We have different understandings of how the legislation should be interpreted and we’re not allowed to discuss individual cases in such meetings. And if you’re not able to look above that it just turns into conflicts. So we thought on the one hand that it was an occupational health issue, my staff were suffering and felt the meetings were hard to handle, but most of all it wasn’t constructive. It was just an outlet for criticisms.923

As indicated here, the problems that continued to afflict the relationship between the sectors were by no means attributed only to the public sector. Civil society actors, too, were frequently portrayed as harbouring negative attitudes or showing a lack of understanding for others’ perspectives. Such behaviours were seen as an obstacle both to good relations between civil society and the public sector and to constructive collaborations among civil society organisations.

Again, none of these issues and challenges were new. They were discussed in the reform documents analysed in chapter five, debated in the ‘dialogue’ processes that preceded the local and national agreements, and they continued to be raised throughout the course of this study. Yet they are only one side of the coin – with the more positive accounts of observed improvements, listed in the first half of this chapter, forming the other.

7.4 Discussion: perceptions of change, continuity and gaps between rhetoric and practice

This chapter has shown that opinions differed on whether the studied reform had brought any changes to the public sector-civil society relationship, and, if so, whether the changes observed were in line with the original intentions of the reform. In this final section I summarise and discuss these findings. I begin by examining the degree to which the reform ideas were seen to clash or converge with established values and practices and then look for signs of institutionalisation and decoupling in the presented accounts.

Clashes and convergences

The findings presented above have shown that while some affected actors dismissed the ambitions to reform civil society involvement practices as a public management fad, and others were sceptical about the value and function of the

923 Interviewee 65, public servant, national public agency, 2017.
promoted changes, the majority were nevertheless in agreement that *some things* had changed in civil society’s access to public decision making in the years covered by this study. They were not, however, all in agreement on the nature, source, or meaning of these changes.

The perceived changes that affected actors reported in interviews pertained both to attitudes and practices. Many of the interviewed actors suggested that civil society was more likely to be recognised as an important stakeholder today than in the past. Overall, civil society as a sector was said to be talked about and written about more than before, with calls for civil society involvement said to be more likely to be included in public service agreements and other steering documents. Many actors also agreed that expectations of how involvement practices should be conducted had been raised in recent years. Both public servants and civil society representatives were said to have become more aware of the pitfalls of poor involvement practice and the different quality guidelines in circulation, such as the European Council’s *Code of Good Practice* and the ‘Dialogue’ principles from the *Agreement* and the *Civil Society Bill*. Civil society actors were reported to have become more likely to protest when they found involvement processes falling short of expectations.

Moreover, a number of the interviewed actors suggested that relations between the public sector and civil society organisations had improved, particularly in settings where involvement practices were seen to function well. They claimed that organisations had become more trusting and professional in interactions with each other. For some, these relationship-gains had been an unexpected side effect of the reform efforts.

As we have seen, however, not all affected actors agreed with these observations. For some public servants, working in areas where civil society involvement had been an established practice for some time, recent attempts to reform the modes of involvement were not seen to have affected them noticeably. This supports the conclusion drawn in chapter five, that there has been a considerable degree of continuity between the traditional approaches to civil society involvement in the Swedish public sector, and the ideas and practices promoted in the reform texts. These findings further lend support to the conclusion drawn by some governance scholars: that the influx of horizontal, interactive decision-making practices referred to as governance have not represented a radical change of direction for the Swedish public sector. 924

Yet the present chapter also found evidence of clashes occurring between old and new approaches to civil society involvement. For some affected actors, the promoted changes, intended to make civil society involvement more inclusive, interactive or timed differently, meant an increase in workload or a need to acquire new skills or funding. Such requirements were not necessarily welcomed by actors in either sector who were already pressured by heavy workloads. Others were frustrated by what they saw as established and well-functioning involvement practices being replaced with new, experimental

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924 Jacobsson, Pierre & Sundström 2015; Pierre & Sundström 2009; Trägårdh 2007. See discussions about this in chapters one, two and four.
approaches. These new methods were objected to on the grounds that they were not seen to adequately fill the functions performed by the discarded methods, that they prioritised new target groups at the expense of long-standing participants, or that they did not comply with the same democratic standards as traditional involvement methods.

Hence, and again as argued in chapter five, it appears that whilst the ideas contained in the studied reform were not particularly new to the Swedish context, some of their practical manifestations were. With the reform understood as an expression of the governance turn in Swedish public administrations, it thus appears that this reform movement has, in some senses at least, represented a change of direction for the public bodies included in this study. Its novelty lies in the promotion of certain methods of involvement, new approaches to participant selection, and new ways of understanding and addressing representativity.

This, too, concurs with the findings of other scholars who have argued that whilst the governance reform movement has not represented the same degree of transformation in Sweden as in certain other parts of the world, it has nonetheless left some marks on public-sector decision-making practices.925

This study has found that the most radical interpretations of the reform ideas saw them as representing a shift in democratic priorities. A few of the interviewed actors suggested that the changes promoted in the reform implied that Sweden was moving away from a system that prioritised accountability and representativity, albeit in ways that had privileged certain factions of civil society and systematically excluded others, towards one that sacrificed these values in favour of inclusion and flexibility. These topics are discussed further in chapter eight.

Finally, this chapter has shown that despite the documented efforts to improve civil society involvement in many parts of the public sector, a number of issues and challenges remained. Interviewed actors reported numerous perceived instances of ceremonial conformity to the involvement norm and the reform agenda, manifested among other ways as involvement activities taking place without purpose or influence. There were also reports of well-intended processes failing to meet the intended standard, due to public servants allegedly lacking the skills or resources to design good quality processes. And whilst many suggested that relations between the sectors had improved in recent years, others claimed that poor mutual understanding continued to cause tensions – both between the sectors and among organisations in civil society. Such tensions were seen to pose continued challenges to the ongoing efforts to give civil society organisations meaningful access to decision making.

To a considerable degree, the listed problems and challenges remained the same throughout this study. The issues that were brought up in the prelude to the reform, in the documents and consultation responses analysed in chapter five, were also raised in interviews, where largely the same themes continued to reappear in every new round.

925 Hysing & Lundberg 2016; Montin & Hedlund 2009a, 2009b.
An institutionalised idea

As noted in chapter four, involving civil society in decision making has been portrayed as a long-established and firmly institutionalised practice in many parts of the Swedish public sector. The present study lends support to this notion. Both the text analysis and interview study made clear that the need for civil society involvement is rarely questioned in the health and social care policy fields in focus for this study. On the contrary, both decision makers and civil society representatives expect it to take place as a matter of course.

If there was general agreement on the value of some degree of civil society involvement, however, there was considerably less consensus on how it should be carried out. The accounts provided by affected actors in this chapter suggest that the methods by which these interactions happen and the types of civil society organisations invited to take part in them, continued to vary greatly between public bodies. Moreover, the interviewed actors had very different views on what constituted good involvement practice. Some favoured traditional methods, such as advisory boards and remiss procedures, on account of these being formalised, institutionalised and accountable – thus fitting neatly into established representative democratic norms and structures. Others held that these methods excluded many organisations from decision making and thereby served to reinforce inequalities within civil society and, by extensions, society at large. They argued that the need to complement the traditional approaches with alternative, more inclusive, flexible or reciprocal modes of involvement remained critical.

From this can be deduced that while the notion that civil society should be involved in public decision making indeed appears institutionalised in the Swedish public sector, and endorsement of the ‘Dialogue’ principles was widespread, there was little agreement on the practical meaning of these principles. Another way of putting this is that while the reform ideas were easy to sign up to, making practice of them appeared less straightforward. With this area of work allegedly remaining the concern of relatively small groups of individuals in either sector, the practical realisation of the reform ideas still appears some way from being institutionalised.

Signs of a decoupling between rhetoric and practice

That the attempts to reform civil society involvement practices had been uneven in reach and impact is neither strange nor unexpected. As was made clear in chapter five, the ideas and practices promoted in the reform texts were not designed to be either prescriptive or universally applied. Instead, it was largely up to the leaders and staff of the organisations targeted by the reform to interpret and edit its content to suit their respective needs and priorities.

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926 A practice being institutionalised here refers to it being a stable and for-granted-taken component of an organisation’s operations. See e.g. Boin & Christensen 2008; Johansson 2002.
Nevertheless, it appears that the issues and challenges raised in this chapter are at risk of going unnoticed, due to evaluations and audits not providing a full and nuanced picture of the public sector’s involvement work. A number of actors reported a mismatch between the involvement activities they had experienced and what the public bodies in question reported to be doing in audits. Interviewees from both sectors gave examples of weak involvement activities that had been inflated in audit reports to sound more impressive, or been given a particular label, such as ‘dialogue’, to appear in line with the expectations of leaders, auditors and civil society stakeholders. Again, this can be read as an indication that the language and rhetoric of the reform texts had spread more successfully than any practical changes associated with them.

I interpret these observations as indications of a decoupling927 having occurred between certain public bodies’ intentions and/or rhetoric pertaining to civil society involvement, and their actual working practices. As outlined in chapter two, such gaps can occur for a number of reasons. One, suggested above, is that whilst the ideas contained in the ‘Dialogue’ principles may be easy to accept, making practice of them is both complicated and resource-intensive. This may have caused some organisations that nominally endorsed the reform ideas to struggle with their implementation, leading to the types of grievances raised in this chapter.

Another explanation is simply that people have interpreted the practical meaning of the reform ideas differently, causing some to dismiss as a failure what others would label a successful implementation of the ‘Dialogue’ principles. An example of this is how public bodies were said to primarily measure the success of the principles’ implementation in quantitative terms – for instance by counting the number of interactions between the sectors – whereas many of those affected by the reform suggested that its success should rather be judged by the nature and impacts of these interactions.

Yet another potential reason behind the apparent decoupling between rhetoric and practice in the implementation of the studied reform, is that not all affected actors welcomed the changes it promoted. There were interviewees from both sectors who were critical of the reform ideas and resisted the practical changes associated with them. And whilst some public sector sceptics were unable to withstand institutional pressures to adopt the language of the reform, the follow-up structures’ lack of sanctions and narrow focus on numbers and labels meant that they had little incentive to make any actual changes to practice.

The chapter has thus found that ceremonial conformity to the reform ideas appeared widespread. And yet the many reports of perceived changes also presented in this chapter suggest that this was not all that the implementation efforts amounted to. On the contrary, interviewed actors from both sectors were broadly in agreement that there had been a gradual shift in both attitudes and practices pertaining to civil society involvement in the period covered by this study. Whilst not all were in favour of the perceived changes, and those in

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927 Decoupling is understood here as gaps between what organisations seek to do (or claim to be doing) and their actual activities. See e.g. Meyer & Rowan 1977, p.356-7.
favour were not necessarily satisfied with the current pace of change, it nonetheless appeared that the reform ideas promoted in the Agreement, the Civil Society Bill and elsewhere had made an impact on the studied settings.

This lends support to the notion put forward by constructivist institutionalists and presented in chapter two, that what appears as ceremonial conformity to a reform may, over time, evolve into substantive change.\(^\text{928}\) Equally, an idea or a practice being dismissed as a temporary fad may still leave a lasting impact on organisations’ working practices.\(^\text{929}\) This can happen when the coexistence of ceremonial and sincere conformity within a field or an organisation gradually establishes new norms of conduct; in this case changing conceptions of what is considered the acceptable minimum standards for civil society involvement.

Understanding differences in interpretation and outcome

In chapter two, I presented theories that constructivist institutionalist scholars have proposed for understanding and predicting organisational responses to external pressures to change.\(^\text{930}\) Whilst different scholars have emphasised slightly different factors in these theoretical models, those whose theories I build on here have broadly agreed that organisational responses to institutional pressures are a function of the interplay between the content and nature of these pressures and the internal dynamics of the target organisation.\(^\text{931}\)

With the content and nature of the institutional pressures pertaining to the reform ideas having been addressed in chapters five and six, I focus here on the last point: the internal dynamics of the target organisation. Here, Christine Oliver has pinpointed three internal factors as contributing to shaping organisational responses to external institutional pressures. These are: awareness among the organisation’s members of the demand and recognition of its value;\(^\text{932}\) the degree of conflict between the institutional pressure and other interests – whether internal values or competing external pressures; and the organisation’s capacity to conform, in the sense of having the resources, skills, autonomy and mandate to do so.\(^\text{933}\)

Mapping targeted organisations’ actual responses to the attempted reform of involvement practices has not been an aim of this study. Indeed, given the vague and ambiguous formulation of the reform ideas and the variety of practices in use in the targeted organisations, it is questionable whether such an endeavour would have been meaningful. Instead, I have chosen to examine how actors affected by the reform perceived differences in interpretations, responses and outcomes, in the belief that their observations can provide valuable insights about the conditions and underlying drivers that have shaped their own and their organisations’ responses to the institutional pressures at play here.


\(^{929}\) Czarniawska 2011; Røvik 2011.

\(^{930}\) Oliver 1991; Greenwood & Hinings 1996; Greenwood et al. 2010; Pache & Santos 2010.

\(^{931}\) Greenwood et al. 2010; Oliver 1991; Pache & Santos 2010.

\(^{932}\) Oliver 1991, p.159, 163. See also Pache & Santos 2010, p.460-461.

\(^{933}\) Oliver 1991, p.159-160. See also Greenwood and Hinings 1996, p.1032-1039.
When interviewees reflected on why the implementation of the attempted reform appeared to have resulted in patchy outcomes, with frequently observed gaps between rhetoric and practice, they highlighted a number of potential obstacles to the reform ideas becoming implemented and ultimately institutionalised in their organisations. These included the ideas being rejected as irrelevant or too resource-intensive, that they were seen as a threat to established ways of conducting the relationship, or that implementation efforts were undermined by a lack of political backing, resources or meaningful follow-up. Reversing these obstacles gives an indication of the conditions that could make possible a more effective implementation of the reform.

Firstly, the interview study suggests that for the reform to have an impact, its ideas must capture the imagination of both the leadership and staff members. This is reminiscent of what Oliver refers to as organisational awareness of an institutional pressure, and what Pache and Santos call the internal representation needed to ease the integration of new institutional pressures into an organisation. This study found that while respondents generally saw the reform ideas as appealing and easy to accept, they were not universally endorsed. The study also revealed a divide between those individuals – in the public sector as well as in civil society – who saw great potential in reforming the modes of interaction between the sectors, and those who did not think that the promoted changes would make a positive difference to their work. The reform capturing the imagination of officials in the targeted organisations was thus portrayed as a prerequisite for it becoming adopted and effectively implemented. Yet it was not always sufficient for individual public servants to endorse the reform ideas. A few respondents reported that their own efforts to improve involvement practices had been thwarted by colleagues not sharing this concern or seniors discouraging them from spending time on such activities. In such situations, clearer steers from the political leadership were portrayed as necessary to signal that the reform agenda was prioritised and to ensure that officials’ conformity to the reform did not stop at the ceremonial level.

Secondly, and as a result of the considerable field fragmentation that characterised the reform’s cross-sector, multi-level setting, the extent to which its messages resonated with established values and practices differed considerably between organisations and the units within them. As noted, some respondents saw the reform ideas as a threat to their established relationship, or as a challenge to democratic principles such as representativity or accountability. For some, reforming involvement practices was simply not high on their list of priorities – they had more pressing demands to tend to. That conflicts of interest and cultural obstacles to the ‘dialogue’ reform were seen to persist in many organisations was thus a recurring theme in interviews. This, too, is in line with the predictive theories offered by Oliver and others, which have suggested that the ability of organisations to conform to institutional pressures is affected by the degree of conflict between the new ideas, established

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Pache and Santos define internal representation as “the extent to which organisational members adhere to and promote a given demand”. Pache & Santos 2010, p.460-461
values, and competing interests. The findings also lend support to the notion that highly fragmented organisational environments, characterised by high numbers of conflicting demands, hamper conformity to new institutional pressures.

Thirdly, and finally, whilst the reform ideas were considered relatively easy to accept, making practice of them was found to be both complicated and resource-intensive. Respondents reported numerous instances of public servants purportedly lacking the skills, understanding or funds required to design and run involvement activities to the standard outlined in the reform texts or in guidance documents such as the European Council’s *Code of Good Practice*. Respondents also reported instances where a lack of organisational flexibility in the public sector was seen to pose obstacles to the reform ideas’ implementation, making it difficult, for instance, to time involvement activities to decision processes. All of these obstacles fall under what constructivist institutionalists have referred to as organisations’ “capacity for action” when faced with institutional pressures. These themes thus correspond well with the theories that these scholars have offered for predicting organisational responses to institutional pressures outlined above and in chapter two.

In the next and final chapter, I offer a suggestion for how these theories could be further developed if attention were also paid to how different logics of reasoning at the micro-level – that is, as displayed in the attitudes and actions of organisational members – foster different types of responses to institutional pressures. There, I also summarise the findings of this thesis and address its implications for practice and further research.

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938 Greenwood and Hinings 1996; Oliver 1991; Pache & Santos 2010.
8. Conclusion: what implications for democracy and further research?

In the introduction to this thesis, I presented a research problem pertaining to recent attempts to reform civil society’s involvement in public decision making in the fields of health and social care policy in Sweden. The attempted reform addressed questions about when and how civil society actors should be able to contribute to public decision making, who should be invited to take part in these activities, and how far their influence should stretch. Its core messages included that civil society involvement ought to be made more inclusive, reciprocal and consequential.

The attempted reform was devised and disseminated both by traditional means, such as government bills and other formal steering measures, and by networks of actors from the public sector and civil society at different levels of government. In common among the different articulations of the reform ideas was a lack of clarity pertaining to precisely what changes were sought and why a change of involvement practices was considered necessary. It was not clear, for instance, whether the reform agenda was a response to perceived failures of traditional involvement practices, a manifestation of the contemporary fashion for discursive decision-making, or driven by some other, unspoken motivations.

This study has sought to bring clarity to these issues. Its aim has been to describe and understand the motivations behind and perceived meanings of the attempted reform of civil society involvement practices. I have addressed this aim using a research design inspired by interpretive policy analysis, focusing closely on the experiences and interpretations of individuals affected by the reform. My analysis draws on constructivist institutionalist theories of how organisations frame and respond to pressures for change.

The study includes two sets of data: a selection of policy texts and civil society consultation responses and interviews with 72 individuals from the public sector and civil society. Two research questions have been asked of these data sets. The first – How can we understand the reform ideas’ appeal to instigators and target audiences? – has been answered in chapters five and six, through an examination of how the studied reform was framed in texts, how its messages were disseminated between and within organisations and how

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914 The ‘framing’ of a reform here refers to the process by which a need for change is articulated, linked to possible solutions and presented to target audiences. See e.g. Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings 2002; Strang & Meyer 1993.
interview respondents interpreted its meaning and value. The second research question – *Has the attempted reform been seen by affected actors to bring about any changes to the public sector-civil society relationship in the affected policy areas?* – has been answered in chapter seven, with a presentation and analysis of respondents’ observations of the reform ideas’ perceived impacts.

In this final chapter, I summarise the findings of the study, clarify its implications and theoretical contributions and highlight questions that it raises for future research. In doing so, I also revisit the research problem presented in chapter one, with a tentative discussion about the democratic implications of the studied reform and a summarising note on how the multi-level, cross-sector setting in which it was situated appears to have affected its contents and fate.

8.1 Understanding the reform’s appeal

Underpinning this study is an ambition to understand what drives public organisations to change their ways of thinking, talking and working, but also what might cause them to resist change. I have argued that the need for such investigations is all the more important when public administration reforms can be assumed to have direct and potentially far-reaching democratic implications, as is the case here. My first research question thus asks how we can understand the reform ideas’ appeal to instigators and target audiences. The key points from this part of the examination are presented below.

A reform built on ambiguity, familiarity and normative visions

In chapter five, I identified four factors in the reform’s framing in texts and respondents’ accounts that appeared to have contributed to its appeal in the studied settings.

*Firstly,* the reform’s central ideas – that civil society involvement ought to be made more inclusive, reciprocal and consequential – were presented as responding to a need of some kind. At times, this need was framed solely in a solution-driven manner – as improvements that were promoted on their own strength but without specific mention of any present problems needing to be addressed. Sometimes, these solutions were presented with reference to external institutional pressures, such as soft regulations stemming from the EU or the UN, demands from civil society actors to reform involvement practices or positive examples picked up from other countries and settings.

Elsewhere, the reform ideas were framed as responding to observed problems with established involvement practices. These included that established involvement methods were seen as insufficiently inclusive or substantive, or that they were said to reinforce power imbalances between the public sector and civil society. Other problems portrayed to be addressed by a reform of civil society involvement practices related to broader socio-economic developments, such as...
complex policy dilemmas and a change in the nature and composition of Swedish civil society. Such developments were said to have highlighted the need to find more flexible and constructive ways of tapping into the knowledge and skills held across all parts of civil society – beyond the large, established organisations that already enjoyed a close relationship with decision makers.940

The studied reform was thus presented alternately as a response to identified problems and as a modernisation agenda that was promoted without reference to specific problems or issues needing to be addressed. This resonates with the observation made in the constructivist institutionalist literature, that public administration reforms rarely emerge solely in response to a set of articulated problems. Rather, they tend to be a function of the convergence of any observed performance failures with circulating ideas about how public organisations ought to be organised.941 These, in turn, are a product of democratic ideals and public management norms that prevail at the time.

Secondly, the reform ideas were portrayed as having a symbolic meaning, in the sense that they were underpinned by persuasive normative visions942 about how a reform of civil society involvement practices fitted into those same democratic ideals and public management norms. This is illustrated by how the reform ideas were associated with a number of desirable qualities such as inclusivity, mutuality, collaboration and flexibility – all consistent with the current fashion for collaborative decision making. This meant that for public servants, applying the ‘dialogue’ label to activities was seen to send positive signals about the progressiveness and openness of these to prospective participants and to their leaders, funders and networks.

Thirdly, the reform ideas’ presentation in texts was intentionally versatile and ambiguous. This ensured that they were open to multiple interpretations and adaptable to different contexts and needs. This is exemplified by how the reform was presented as addressing a series of problems with established involvement practices, yet could be seen as relevant also where no such problems were experienced or acknowledged. In such cases, the reform ideas could be interpreted as standards to aspire to – an articulation of what good involvement practice should look like – rather than an acknowledgement of past wrongdoings or a requirement to make any substantive changes to existing practices.

I have suggested that the vague wordings of the reform texts were a result both of how they were first conceived – in a collaborative, cross-sector setting involving organisations of different types and agendas943 – and how they were intended to be used: by public bodies at different levels of government. That the reform texts did not clearly define ‘dialogue’ or prescribe any particular involvement methods enabled more organisations to sign up to their principles and thereby eased their spread across the public sector.

Fourthly, and finally, the values associated with these reform ideas were familiar, in the sense that they did not, to most observers, imply a radical

940 This was not, however, a prevalent theme in either texts or interviews.
943 This refers to the Agreement process where the first ‘Dialogue’ principle was drawn up.
departure from the traditional approaches to civil society involvement in Swedish health and social care policy. Rather, the reform ideas were perceived as functional and not particularly controversial tweaks of established means of involvement, making them easier for target audiences to endorse.944 This is illustrated by how many interviewees portrayed the reform ideas as intuitive and commonsensical. Making civil society involvement more inclusive, interactive and reciprocal was seen as in line with both the Swedish tradition of interest-group involvement and the current fashion for discursive decision-making practices.

Discursive and informal pressures key to generating interest

Next, I examined the different institutional pressures through which the reform ideas had spread in the public sector and civil society. In doing so, I also analysed the functions these were said to have performed in generating support for the reform ideas.

When respondents reflected on what had informed their views on civil society involvement, they pointed to a number of parallel channels of steering and inspiration. Similar messages about the need to make involvement practices more inclusive, considered and consequential were said to have emerged from several directions at once. These ideas travelled across the public sector in different forms and packages: as expectations from leaders, communicated through soft regulation and audits, and as ideas and practices picked up and spread by individuals and networks in the public sector and civil society in Sweden and abroad.

Thus, while the publication and implementation of the Agreement and the Civil Society Bill were seen by many to have given the reform agenda a welcome, formal endorsement, the weight that interviewees attributed to these documents and their respective implementation structures varied significantly. Some emphasised the Agreement’s importance in clarifying the Government’s intentions and encouraging practical changes to involvement practices; others questioned its value or claimed to be unaware that it existed. For some respondents, institutional pressures exerted by the EU or UN were said to have had more impact on their involvement practices than any steering efforts by the Swedish Government.

These various examples of soft regulation and auditing pertaining to civil society involvement practices were broadly portrayed as having helped raise awareness of the reform agenda. However, their ability to impact on the quality of involvement practices was repeatedly called into question by affected actors. The interview study instead suggested that relying too heavily on soft regulations and audits to disseminate the reform ideas risked encouraging a perfunctory approach to civil society involvement, with organisers paying more

attention to how activities appeared to external observers and auditors, than how they could be designed to better meet the needs of decision makers and stakeholders. Quantitative and poorly defined audits and evaluations were highlighted as particularly problematic in this context. When auditors were primarily concerned with counting the numbers of interactions between the sectors without addressing their form or impacts, involvement organisers were said to have little incentive to spend extra time and resources on improving their methods.

In this context, discursive steering activities such as practical guidelines, training courses, learning networks and similar, emerged as important complements to regulatory and auditory activities. Interviewees suggested that there had been a surge in discursive steering pertaining to civil society involvement in the years covered by this study. These activities offered the normative arguments and practical guidance seen to be lacking in many regulatory and auditory activities.

Also emphasised as important for generating interest in and support for the reform ideas across the public sector were various types of informal institutional pressures,945 taking the form of officials and civil society representatives sharing ideas and experiences with each other, individual reform advocates offering inspiration and civil society organisations demanding more meaningful involvement opportunities.

Discursive steering and informal pressures were thus presented as more impactful tools for bringing about a change in the quality of involvement practices than regulations or audits alone. Yet a perceived downside of these dissemination channels was that their reach was said to be limited. They were seen to primarily target already initiated groups, such as public officials tasked with implementing the reform or people who took a personal interest in the reform ideas. Interviewees suggested that efforts to improve civil society involvement practices thus remained the concern of relatively small numbers of individuals in the studied policy fields. This can be seen to leave the reform agenda vulnerable to collapsing when these people move to new jobs or if their priorities change.

A reform underpinned by norm-driven and outcome-oriented reasoning

As outlined in chapters one and two, I have sought in this study to embrace a pragmatic approach to organisational analysis.946 That is, whilst my analytical tools are primarily drawn from the constructivist institutionalist literature, I have kept an open mind to findings that support a more rationalist understanding of organisational behaviour. This means that in analysing how the studied reform has been framed and interpreted, I have not presumed that its conception and

945 Oliver 1991.
946 Czarniawska 2008; Jupille, Caporaso & Checkel 2003; Oliver 1991; Ravik 2008; Tallberg 2010.
dissemination, or organisations’ responses to it, have been solely driven by norms and trends – what constructivist institutionalists refer to as the logic of appropriateness.\textsuperscript{947} Instead I expected, and found, that these processes are more likely to have been guided by an interaction between norm-driven and outcome-oriented logics of reasoning; their balance a function of a number of interrelated conditions pertaining to the situation at hand, the culture of the organisation and field and the disposition of the individuals involved.

How such interactions between logics may happen can be exemplified by how a public administration reform that emerges in response to an explicit, articulated problem – such as the failure of a particular working practice to achieve its intended goals – will appear to be informed by a logic of expected outcomes in the sense that it offers a solution to the perceived performance failure. Yet the form it takes will likely be a product of the administrative and cultural standards dominating the field at that moment in time. In this sense, the contents of the reform can be expected to be guided by a logic of appropriateness, even if its origins were rooted in an instrumental need.\textsuperscript{948}

The decision to use an interpretive, micro-level research design in this study was made in part in the belief that such an approach would enable me to make visible how different logics of reasoning have combined to shape affected actors’ interpretations of and responses to the studied reform. This does not imply that I presumed to be able to reveal in full the motivations that underlay the interviewed actors’ responses to the reform ideas. With the constructivist perspective having usefully highlighted that the forces that drive human and organisational behaviours tend to be complex, unspoken and often unacknowledged, such an objective would likely not have been feasible.

Instead, this study has been carried out with the expectation that interviewees’ accounts of their motivations for engaging in certain practices cannot be taken at face value. Aside from the fact that people are not always conscious of the forces and impulses that guide their own behaviour, they may also be unwilling to admit to them. It can be assumed, for instance, that people interviewed in their professional capacity would be reluctant to admit to following any other logic than one that ensures the best possible outcomes. This is exemplified by how interviewees, when describing how public management fads encouraged a perfunctory compliance with the reform ideas, were more likely to refer to others’ behaviour than their own.\textsuperscript{949}

However, whilst the present study might not be able to fully account for the motivating forces that drove the reform’s conception and implementation, the combined narratives provided in interviews by actors affected by the reform can nonetheless offer hints about the role that different logics of reasoning have played in shaping its fate. These were discernible both in affected actors’ attitudes to the broader involvement norm and to the reform ideas specifically.

\textsuperscript{948} C.f. March & Olsen 1998.
\textsuperscript{949} Exceptions existed, however: some respondents were open with how they paid lip service to certain reform ideas in order to satisfy the expectations of their leaders or evaluators.
Many respondents portrayed civil society involvement, irrespective of form, as a means to an end: a way for public servants to tap into the knowledge or experiences of civil society organisations and a way for civil society organisations to seek influence over public policy. This is illustrated by how many respondents could provide examples of how civil society involvement had been of use in their work, for instance by generating tangible benefits such as new knowledge or contacts. Their motivations for continuing to engage with such activities thus appeared to be in part informed by a logic of expected outcomes.

Again, however, this observation must be caveated with the acknowledgement that civil society involvement was also a firmly institutionalised norm in the studied settings, meaning that public officials could not easily diverge from it. Its institutionalised status is illustrated by the experiences of public sector respondents who questioned the value of civil society involvement, yet recognised it as an established and thereby inescapable part of decision making in their particular policy fields. Their reasons for engaging with these activities thus appear to be more influenced by a logic of appropriateness.

Respondents’ attitudes to the reform, too, displayed traces of different logics of reasoning. When actors claimed to endorse the reform ideas in the belief that doing so would improve the quality of input or extend the benefits they derived from involvement practices to more people or issues, their conviction can be said to be based, to some degree at least, on a logic of expected outcomes. By contrast, when actors endorsed these ideas primarily because their leadership instructed them to or because they associated them with particular desired values or qualities, but the impacts on outputs were of secondary concern, their reasoning appears to be more informed by a logic of appropriateness.

Whilst positive interpretations of the reform ideas were relatively widespread among respondents, with many seeing the reform as a welcome acknowledgement that traditional practices would benefit from being reviewed, others remained sceptical about its ability to make a substantive difference to their work. Their reasons for questioning or rejecting the reform ideas, too, displayed traces of both norm-driven and outcome-oriented logics of reasoning. The reform ideas could be opposed on normative grounds if, for instance, respondents saw them as undermining established democratic principles. They could be opposed on outcome-oriented grounds if affected actors did not consider them effective means of achieving their organisations’ goals, or if the cost of implementing them was not seen to stand in proportion to the expected gains.

On the basis of this analysis, I thus argue along with Røvik\textsuperscript{950} and others\textsuperscript{951} that neither a rationalist nor a strictly constructivist perspective is sufficient for understanding why and how reforms of this kind are received by

\textsuperscript{950} Røvik 2008, p.44-47.
\textsuperscript{951} Czarniawska 2008, Jupille, Caporaso & Checkel 2003; March & Olsen 2009; Oliver 1991; Røvik 2008; Tallberg 2010.
public organisations. Instead, my findings support the idea that both types of reasoning come into play in shaping individuals’ attitudes to organisational ideas and practices and, by extension, their organisations’ responses to them. To quote Røvik, this implies that new organisational ideas and practices “can both be tools with instrumental effects and socially constructed symbols with meaning-constituting, legitimising effects”\textsuperscript{7}.\textsuperscript{952} As illustrated here, the two logics are often so muddled as to make separating them futile.

Reinstating these points, which may appear commonsensical to anyone not wedded to a particular branch of organisational analysis, serves an additional purpose in this thesis. Later in this chapter, I will suggest that the fact that interpretations of the reform ideas differed in the degree to which they were primarily norm-driven or outcome-oriented, raises questions about whether the balance between logics also affects how an idea or practice is put to use in organisations. I will argue that paying more attention to this micro-dimension of organisational behaviour would enable institutionalist scholars to develop a fuller and more nuanced understanding of why public organisations respond in different ways to institutional pressures to change – insights that could benefit both theorists and practitioners.

8.2 Continuity, change and ceremonial conformity

The idea that public decision making should take into account the perspectives of interest groups from civil society and elsewhere is not, as we know, new to the Swedish public sector. In the fields of health and social care policy in focus here, close interactions between civil society and decision makers have been an institutionalised, stable and for-granted-taken practice for some time. I have argued above that the congruence between the reform ideas and this long-established tradition added to the reform’s appeal for decision makers and civil society stakeholders. The new ideas and working practices offered the promise of modernisation without conflicting with the traditional modes of public sector-civil society interaction in Sweden.

Yet this apparent continuity between old and new values and practices also raises questions about what was really new in the promoted ideas, and whether the reform attempts had led to any changes in attitudes or practices. This is the topic of my second research question, which asks if the attempted reform had been seen by affected actors to bring about any changes to the public sector-civil society relationship in the studied policy fields.

Similar questions have been asked in scholarly debates about the so-called governance turn’s impacts on the Swedish public sector. Queries addressed in these discussions include whether governance reforms have brought any substantive changes to Swedish decision-making practices or if Sweden could

\textsuperscript{952} Røvik 2008, p.44.
really have been described in terms of governance all along. My answer to the second research question, summarised over the following pages, constitutes a contribution to these discussions.

Observations of change

The public servants, politicians and civil society representatives interviewed here were broadly in agreement that the years covered by this study had seen a number of changes to the public sector-civil society relationships. The changes they claimed to have observed pertained to both attitudes and practices. Examples of the former included that many decision makers in the studied policy fields were said to take civil society more seriously as a source of insights and experience than in the past. Overall, public servants and elected representatives were said to show a better understanding of civil society and a greater appreciation of the contributions its organisations can make to decision making, to public services and to society at large.

The perceived changes to practices included that opportunities for involvement were said to be offered to civil society organisations more frequently than before, that they had been extended to new policy areas, that efforts were made to invite more or different types of organisations to these activities and that a more diverse range of methods were used alongside traditional approaches such as the remiss procedure and civil society advisory councils. It was also suggested that civil society actors were using new strategies for influencing decision makers, including that organisations were said to collaborate more in campaigns and lobbying activities.

Overall, many respondents suggested that the accepted minimum standard for civil society involvement had been slightly raised in the period covered by this study. Public servants and civil society representatives alike were said to have become more aware of the pitfalls of poor involvement practice and the different quality guidelines available to help avoid these.

It was further suggested that political steers on this agenda had given civil society organisations a boost of confidence that strengthened them in interactions with the public sector. The formal, cross-party commitment to the ‘Dialogue’ principles in the Agreement documents, combined with the ongoing efforts to implement the Civil Society Bill, were seen to have given civil society organisations’ policy work a level of backing and legitimacy that had been missing before. This was said to have contributed to making affected civil society actors more likely to speak up when involvement activities fell short of the expected standard. In some cases, respondents suggested that the alleged more frequent and more considered interactions between the sectors had generated a more trusting relationship between them.

Hysing & Lundberg 2016; Montin & Hedlund 2009a, 2009b; Trägårdh 2007. The Swedish model has also contained other elements associated with governance, such as local self-government and the separation of agencies from ministerial departments. See e.g. Jacobsson, Pierre & Sundström 2015; Pierre & Sundström 2009.
Again, it should be remembered that the focus here is on affected actors’ interpretations and perceived observations of these policy events. No attempts have been made to objectively measure the reform’s reach and impacts. Nevertheless, I interpret these accounts as indications that a shift of some degree was seen to have taken place in both the methods and priorities pertaining to civil society involvement in decision making in health and social care. The studied reform conforms both in contents and working methods to several of the features highlighted as hallmarks of governance. This includes the network setting in which it was conceived, the institutional ambiguity that characterised its contents and subsequent implementation structures, the combination of soft and discursive steering with which it was disseminated, and the interactive, non-hierarchical nature of the methods it promoted.

Hence, returning to the question of whether governance represents something new to the Swedish context, I argue in line with other scholars on this subject that while the idea that civil society ought to be involved in decision making is not new to the Swedish public sector, the governance turn nevertheless appears to have contributed new perspectives on how such activities should be carried out. The notion that the public sector should broaden its invitations for input to more parts of civil society, including small, ad-hoc organisations, networks and sometimes individual activists, can be seen as a diversion from a past tradition where large, established and democratically structured organisations were given privileged access to decision makers. The suggestions that civil society ought to be offered opportunities to give input earlier or more frequently in decision processes and in more reciprocal forms, represents a departure, at least on paper, from a more hierarchical system where involvement activities were planned according to a formalised schedule and primarily to suit the needs of decision makers.

Ceremonial conformity and other persistent issues

Whilst the largely positive reports of perceived improvements to public sector-civil society relations recounted above might give the impression that the complaints said to have prompted the reform had been addressed, they were by no means seen to be fully rectified. Two main caveats deserve to be highlighted. 

Firstly, not all respondents agreed with the positive observations of change summarised above. Some had not taken much notice of the reform attempts or any impacts they may have had. Others had experienced a clash between the reform ideas and their established values and practices. A few respondents questioned the reform ideas on practical grounds: the promoted changes were seen as resource-intensive and not enough of an improvement on established working practices to warrant a change. Some dismissed the new ideas as a public management fad that, whilst presented as a democratisation reform, in

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955 Palumbo 2010; Cohen 2007; Mörth 2006.
fact risked diluting civil society’s capacities for influence. This was exemplified with accounts of how established approaches such as policy advisory councils had been replaced with hearings or citizen participation events – activities that on the surface might appear more open and inclusive but in practice did not offer the same levels of influence as the discarded methods. For similar reasons, actors who already enjoyed close and well-functioning cross-sector relationships could see a reform of involvement practices as a threat to these.

Secondly, respondents made clear that a number of issues and problems continued to afflict the public sector-civil society relationship and thereby impeded the reform ideas’ implementation. A prominent theme in these accounts, which was brought up by reform enthusiasts and sceptics alike, was that public bodies were said to frequently make ceremonial submissions to the reform ideas. This was said to be manifested as involvement activities taking place without clarity of purpose or without a clear link to decision making. Related to this were reports of inappropriate usages of the ‘dialogue’ label. This was when any form of interaction with civil society organisations, irrespective of purpose or approach, was categorised as ‘dialogue’, thus stretching the term to the point where it was seen to have lost its intended meaning. Another issue raised in interviews was that there remained in parts of the public sector a lack of understanding about civil society organisations’ particular needs and circumstances, which was said to result in involvement activities being designed without sensitivity to these. There were also reports of well-intended activities falling short due to officials lacking the skills or resources to design and run good-quality involvement processes.958

Hence, the actors interviewed in this study suggested that there remained significant variation in both attitudes to and the quality of involvement work conducted by different public bodies and by departments and units within them. Moreover, there were widespread reports of there being a significant gap, or decoupling, between what public bodies intended or claimed to be doing with respect to civil society involvement and their actual activities.959

I suggest that the coexistence of widespread accounts of ceremonial conformity to the reform ideas and persistent reports of the reform agenda having brought a number of positive changes, lends support to the conclusion drawn by DiMaggio and Powell, among others,960 that what appears as ceremonial adoption of ideas and practices may still, over time, leave a substantive mark on organisations’ values and working practices. This can happen when the coexistence of ceremonial and sincere conformity within a field or an organisation gradually establishes new norms of conduct, in this case changing conceptions of what is considered the acceptable minimum standard for civil society involvement.

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958 As noted, this and other obstacles to civil society organisations playing a meaningful role in decision making are also raised in SOU 2016:13 Palett för ett stärkt civilsamhälle, in particular in section 4.2 Hinder för civilsamhällets roll i demokratin.
960 Czarniawska 2011; DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Røvik 2011; Sahlin & Wedlin 2008.
From democracy to efficiency?

As outlined in the introductory chapter, this study took place in what can be described as a transformative time for the Swedish civil society-public sector relationship. It was a time when civil society’s role and status was being reviewed and debated in a number of different contexts. In these discussions, its role in providing input to public decision making formed a relatively minor part. More attention was paid to what role civil society organisations should play in the output side of public services and what their status should be in relation to public and for-profit service providers in this context. The implications of Swedish civil society’s alleged move “from voice to service”, first noted in the 1990s and arguably boosted by the Alliance parties’ election victory in 2006, have been widely debated in both politics and academia.\footnote{E.g. Johansson, Nordfeldt & Johansson 2015; Lundström & Wijkström 1995, 2012; Reuter 2012.} This development was accompanied by a shift in the terminology surrounding this social sector, with terms such as ‘associational life’ and ‘popular movements’, traditionally associated with the social democratic welfare model, being replaced with the broader, if not exactly politically neutral ‘civil society’.\footnote{Amnå 2005; Trägårdh 1999, 2007.}

The reform attempts in focus for this study did not emerge independently from these broader shifts in the visions for civil society’s role and status. On the contrary, they appear to have been heavily informed by them. The Agreement in which the first ‘Dialogue’ principle was presented was the product of the Alliance Government along with a group of national-level civil society actors seeking to clarify the terms of their relationship in the fields of health and social care. In these negotiations, the Government’s explicit aim was to encourage a more diverse range of providers in health and social care services.\footnote{Prop. 2009/10:55; Reinfeldt 2006; Skr. 2008/09:207.} Some respondents in this study have suggested that the democratic components of the Agreement – articulated primarily in the principles on ‘Transparency’ and ‘Dialogue’ – were of subordinate concern to those running the process: an add-on included to appease certain factions of participants.\footnote{Similar conclusions have been drawn by other scholars of these developments; see e.g. Johansson 2011.}

This study suggests that the growing emphasis on civil society organisations as potential service providers has had a continued effect on their voice function, and thereby on the reform agenda studied here. These impacts have been both positive and negative. On a positive note, some organisations suggested that their taking on the role of service providers appeared to have elevated their status vis-à-vis the public sector also in other contexts. They claimed to have progressed from being seen as “merely” grant recipients or external voices to which decision makers listened out of duty, to being recognised as partners to the state. This was said to have had the knock-on effect that they were treated as more valued stakeholders in decision processes.

On a more negative note, the shift from a relationship where organisations were given grants to enable them to freely exercise their voice function to one

\footnote{Prop. 2009/10:55; Reinfeldt 2006; Skr. 2008/09:207.}
increasingly shaped around service contracts, could also be seen to impede their
ability to contribute to policy processes. One example of how this was said to happen was that civil society organisations’ activities were said to be increasingly steered by public service contracts and their time taken up by administrative tasks built into these, giving them less time to spend on core activities or on trying to influence policy. Another example was how their interactions with the public sector were said to increasingly pertain to the terms of their contracts and the contents of services, providing fewer opportunities to influence strategic policy issues.

Whilst this study did not make possible a systematic tracking of attitudes or practices over time, respondents’ accounts suggest that the impetus of the involvement norm may have shifted somewhat in the years covered by this study, from being rooted in the democratic principle that civil society organisations have a right to be heard on issues that concern them, to a more instrumental purpose, grounded in a concern for the effectiveness of services. That actors interviewed in this study rarely made reference to civil society involvement as a democratic right or a means of fostering active citizenship, but instead linked it to instrumental benefits for their own work, can be seen to lend further support to this notion.

The key reform texts did link civil society involvement to democracy, however. As noted, the reform was framed in part with reference to a need to “broaden and deepen the bases of public decisions” and to strengthen democracy.\textsuperscript{965} This was to happen by public bodies making civil society involvement more inclusive, reciprocal and consequential and through their experimenting with alternative modes of engagement alongside established methods such as advisory councils and remiss procedures.\textsuperscript{966} What the proposed changes meant for representative democratic values such as representativity and accountability was not elaborated on. Yet where the reform ideas have been implemented, they have given rise to precisely these kinds of questions.\textsuperscript{967}

This study suggests that attempts to improve involvement practices involves an often difficult balancing act between new and old practices, different types of organisations, different forms of representation and, ultimately, different democratic ideals. Improving access to decision making for some organisations often serves to restrict access for others. Inviting more organisations to take part, for instance by replacing a longstanding advisory council with large, ad-hoc hearings, may be done at the risk of undermining each participant’s potential for influence. Introducing flexible, non-hierarchical structures for policy formulation or decision making may lead to a loss of accountability.

In other words, measures taken with the (purported) intent of deepening democracy and bringing more perspectives into public decision making carry the risk of undermining existing systems for representativity, whilst simultaneously diluting participants’ actual influence. This brings to mind Mark Bevir’s

\textsuperscript{965} Prop. 2009/10:55, p.32, 56.
\textsuperscript{966} IJ2008/2110/UF; Prop. 2009/10:55.
\textsuperscript{967} C.f. SOU 2016:5 Låt fler forma framtiden!, particularly section 3.4.
observation, quoted in chapter two, that governance “borrows the language of radical democracy while missing its spirits.”\textsuperscript{968} Indeed, these findings are in line with past studies of governance reforms, which have found that governance practices can pose significant challenges to the values of legitimacy, accountability and representation that underpin established models of representative democracy.\textsuperscript{969}

It might be assumed that a reform that in its practical manifestations poses such potential challenges to Sweden’s established model of interest group involvement would give rise to discussions about its democratic implications. Yet, as noted, such considerations were largely absent from this study. Whereas the policy texts analysed in chapter five did emphasise the democratic value of civil society involvement, the later texts in particular placed more emphasis on efficacy gains: how involving civil society could benefit decisions and outcomes. References to the democratic implications of civil society involvement in general or the reform ideas specifically were also largely absent from interviews. With the exception of a minority of respondents who questioned the democratic credentials of the reform ideas, the majority appeared to maintain a pragmatic and outcome-oriented attitude to these practices. They portrayed civil society involvement as a means to an end and appeared to judge such activities primarily on how well they filled the purpose of gathering input for decision makers or channelling influence for civil society organisations.\textsuperscript{970}

It is my interpretation that the pragmatic, outcome-focused attitude to civil society involvement held by many of those targeted by the reform, in combination with the follow-up structures in use being said to not adequately capture implementation failures, have contributed to the reform’s democratic implications being overlooked. Whilst examining its democratic credentials has not been an aim of this thesis, I nevertheless argue that this is a topic that deserves further attention from both practitioners and scholars. Practitioners would benefit from considering the democratic principles that underpin different decision-making practices, to ensure that shifts in working methods do not take place without sufficient consideration of the trade-offs in values and priorities this involves, whom they affect and how they are justified.

Meanwhile, scholars concerned with the democratic credentials and effects of governance reforms might benefit from conducting closer investigations both of what democratic principles take precedence in the formal framings of such reforms and how those implementing or otherwise affected by them interpret and rationalise their democratic implications. How, for instance, are trade-offs between inclusion and accountability rationalised when public officials replace highly formalised interest group involvement practices such as policy advisory fora, with ad-hoc hearings? How do public bodies, used to assessing organisation on the basis of their internal democratic structures, navigate a civil

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize\	extsuperscript{968} Bevir 2006, p.426.\textsuperscript{969} Dryzek 2010, p.122-124; Sundström & Pierre 2009, p.17-18.\textsuperscript{970} As acknowledged in chapter five, it is possible that the democratic dimension of these activities was simply taken for granted and therefore not addressed by respondents. It may be misguided to try to differentiate gains for decisions and outcomes from gains for democracy, as some would argue that the two are intrinsically linked in this context.
\end{flushright}
society increasingly populated with informal networks and individual activists? In conducting such investigations, scholars may also benefit from paying closer attention to how individual actors’ personal understandings of what constitutes good democratic decision-making affect how they interpret governance reforms and translate their ideas into practice.

8.3 Logics of reasoning as means of understanding variations in responses

Opinions thus differed on whether the reform attempts examined in this thesis had resulted in actual changes to practice, and, if so, whether the observed changes were in line with the original intentions of the reform. In chapter seven, I examined how these differences in interpretation and outcome could be understood with the aid of theories developed by constructivist institutionalist scholars. I found that the obstacles to the reform’s implementation that were mentioned in interviews broadly corresponded with the conditions that institutionalist scholars have listed as shaping organisational responses to institutional pressures. These were that the reform ideas must capture the imagination of both staff members and leadership in the targeted organisations; that competing interests and pressures – including a commitment to established practices and relationships – could impede endorsement of the reform ideas; and that public organisations were said to often lack the understanding, skills and resources required to run effective involvement processes.971

However, I suggest that our understanding of the conditions that shape organisational responses to institutional pressures could be further deepened if attention were also paid to how different logics of reasoning influence organisational behaviour. Specifically, I believe that institutionalist scholars would benefit from exploring how the balance between norm-driven and outcome-oriented reasoning at the actor level contribute to shaping organisational responses to public reforms and other institutional pressures. The purpose of this section is to take some tentative steps in this direction, building on the findings of this study.

As noted earlier in this chapter, the present study indicates that the extent to which norm-driven or outcome-oriented rationales dominated interpretations of the reform ideas differed between organisations, the individuals within them and over time. This raises the important question of whether different logics of reasoning and the balance between them also affect how an idea or practice is interpreted and put to use in organisations. The findings of the interview study suggest that they do. It hints at a divide between those public sector actors who implemented the reform ideas primarily in response to coercive or informal pressures, thus following a logic of appropriateness, and those for whom

compliance with the reform ideas was also underpinned by a personal conviction that doing so would lead to better outcomes. The latter group included reform advocates and reform entrepreneurs – individuals who played an active role in driving the creation, dissemination or implementation of the reform ideas. It also included people not directly involved in the reform agenda, for whom positive experiences of civil society involvement activities were said to have convinced them that conforming to the reform ideas would expand these benefits to more issues or groups. This is the learning-by-doing mechanism emphasised in chapter six as a powerful tool for generating sustained support for the reform ideas.

Some of the more enthusiastic respondents expressed frustration at colleagues who were said to make nominal submissions to the reform ideas in response to regulatory pressures, to increase legitimacy for a decision or to make a good impression on observers or stakeholders, but without taking an interest in how the form or quality of the activities affected outcomes. In such cases, the original intentions of the ‘Dialogue’ principles were seen to have been lost, leading to poorly planned, perfunctory practices. This suggests that instances where public officials’ reasons for endorsing the reform ideas were dominated by a logic of appropriateness – that is, where they made nominal commitments to the reform without a personal conviction that doing so would improve outcomes – were more likely to lead to the window-dressing tendencies and decoupling between rhetoric and practice described in chapter seven.

Meanwhile, public servants whose involvement work was underpinned by the belief that interactions with civil society had clear benefits for decisions and outcomes appeared more likely to take active steps to improve involvement practices. This suggests that the endurance and potential institutionalisation of the reform ideas may rely on people’s endorsement of them being to some degree underpinned by a logic of expected outcomes.

I believe that this is an area that would benefit from further study. I propose that a closer examination of how different logics of reasoning foster different types of responses to institutional pressures could provide a fuller and more nuanced understanding of how public administration reforms are received and put to practice differently by different organisations in the public sector. Such an understanding would not only serve to strengthen the micro-theory of organisational analysis, but could also provide valuable insights for practice. It might, for instance, highlight the value of learning-by-doing as a means of generating sustained buy-in for public reforms. It might also underline the importance of designing follow-up structures that make visible and discourage instances of ‘ceremonial’ conformity, such as auditing measures that emphasise quality over quantity and involve some degree of repercussion for noncompliance.

8.4 A reform to suit a cross-sector, multi-level audience

With organisational analysts having been primarily concerned with how reforms spread between or are dealt with by individual organisations, I have argued that the multi-level, cross-sector network setting in which this study is situated makes this an unusual case for studying organisational change in the public sector. I have further suggested that the reform examined here serves as an example of how governance increases the field fragmentation of public decision-making environments, in the sense of bringing more stakeholders that represent different perspectives and interests into decision processes. In this final section of the thesis, I address the part of my research problem that pertains to how this multi-level, cross-sector setting appears to have affected the reform’s contents and fate. My conclusions on this topic are woven into the summaries of findings above and can be recapped in three main points.

Firstly, the particulars of the studied settings appear to have impacted on the contents and framing of the reform. The diversity of organisations involved in the Agreement process meant that to avoid alienating any participant groups and in the hope of generating broad support for the initiative, the first ‘Dialogue’ principle was intentionally vaguely formulated and not prescriptive. Importantly, the Agreement was never intended to be a legally binding document. It was acknowledged that the majority of public sector-civil society interactions took place at the local and regional level of government and that it would be inappropriate for any central body to try to dictate how other public organisations should conduct these relationships.

Secondly, similar sentiments appear to have guided how the reform ideas were disseminated and promoted through the Agreement infrastructure, the implementation of the Civil Society Bill and elsewhere. The cross-sector, multi-level settings targeted by the reform ideas meant that this was not an agenda suited to coercive, ‘hard’ steering. Often, the same individuals held overlapping roles in the reform’s conception and implementation. For instance, some of the public servants interviewed in this study acted as both authors and implementers of the reform. Some civil society representatives acted both as instigators of the reform agenda and, subsequently, as participants in involvement activities that were shaped by it.

Consequently, it was largely up to the people charged with implementing the reform ideas to decide what they meant in their respective organisations and units and how they should be translated into practice, if indeed they should. Those organisations seeking practical guidance on how their involvement practices could be made more in line with the ‘Dialogue’ principles could find such guidance in the numerous handbooks, training courses and networks available for this purpose. These examples of discursive steering, along with the

974 The Agreement ‘dialogue’ process involved representatives from the Government Offices, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions and around 80 civil society organisations.
975 Gavelin 2010 and Nordfeldt 2012. See also Yanow 1987, p.109, on the use of ambiguity to accommodate multiple perspectives in policy formulation.
extensive sharing of experiences and ideas taking place informally within organisations and networks, were thus portrayed as having served important functions in generating interest for the reform agenda and cultivating the practical skills required for its implementation. Respondents particularly highlighted the key role played by individual reform advocates in spreading the reform ideas. Also emphasised was the importance of learning-by-doing as a means of helping public servants from a range of backgrounds see the value of trying new approaches to civil society involvement.

Thirdly, the institutional ambiguity that characterised the conception, framing and dissemination of the reform agenda was also found to have brought a number of challenges to its implementation. The ambiguity and versatility that arguably helped spread the reform messages to more audiences turned out to be a potential weakness in its subsequent dissemination and implementation. Interviewees suggested that the reform ideas were so loosely articulated that targeted organisations could edit and stretch them to the point of meaninglessness. They also suggested that an over-reliance on quantitative, weakly enforced auditing measures further encouraged these tendencies. And yet, the vague wordings of the original reform texts made it difficult to devise alternative auditing models. The vague framing of the reform meant that the promoted changes could be interpreted in a number of ways, which meant that implementation efforts were judged very differently depending on what interpretation observers or auditors adhered to. Hence measures that one organisation considered demonstrations of their acquiescence to the reform ideas might be dismissed by someone who read the reform texts differently as their avoidance or defiance of the same.976

That a reform which is designed to suit a highly diverse audience and is disseminated primarily through soft steering and informal pressures, results in diverse interpretations and patchy outcomes, should not come as a surprise. Yet in the present study, the reform’s ambiguity appears to have had the presumably unintended effect of concealing some of the problems and challenges that arose in its implementation. These include the dilemmas accounted for above, pertaining to how established democratic principles such as representativity and accountability should be balanced against the reform’s emphasis on inclusion, reciprocity and ‘dialogue’. They also included widespread reports of public bodies making ceremonial submissions to the reform ideas, with practices said to not live up to the spirit of the ‘Dialogue’ principles.

And whilst this study did not rule out the possibility that such ceremonial conformity might over time have contributed to more substantive changes,977 it was pointed out that frequent exposure to poorly designed involvement processes risked putting both officials and civil society participants off taking part in such activities. In other words, civil society involvement being frequently used for window-dressing purposes risked further undermining the reform agenda.

The persistent indications of there being a gap between what public bodies intended or claimed to be doing with regards to civil society involvement and their actual activities is problematic for several reasons. One is that it indicates that the information provided in strategic documents, audits and evaluations about the amount and types of involvement activities occurring in the public sector may be misleading. This can be expected to make it difficult to judge the success of efforts to implement the reform ideas in focus here. It also hampers any continued efforts to improve involvement practices, as it makes it difficult to assess where and what type of improvements are still needed.

Ultimately, these issues have democratic consequences. They pertain to important questions about who, when and how interest groups are to be given access to decision-making processes, questions that merit extensive discussion and consideration. If they are not made visible and acknowledged, however, these discussions are unlikely to take place. It is my hope that this thesis will contribute to making these issues visible.
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**Websites**

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Cambridge Dictionary Online: https://dictionary.cambridge.org

Idea-based organisations’ coordinating group (Idéburnas samordningsgrupp): www.ideburna.se

Swedish Government’s website for thematic consultation fora (sakråd): www.regeringen.se/sakrad

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*All valid March 2018.*
Primary sources

Official texts

Consultation responses

979 These are the sources used in the text analysis in chapter five. Sources used in the overview of implementation activities in section 6.1 are included in the list of references above.


Famna (2008b) Yttrande över Förslag till överenskommelse mellan regeringen och idéburna organisationer inom det sociala området. 2008-06-30


SKOOPI, Sociala Arbetskooperativens Intresseorganisation (2008) Synpunkter ”Förslag till överenskommelse mellan regeringen och idebörna organisationer inom det sociala området”.


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Appendix: list of interviewees

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* Interviewed in pairs.

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Studiens bakgrund och syften
Sverige har en lång och stabil tradition av nära samverkan mellan offentliga beslutsfattare och organiserade intressen. Det civila samhällets organisationer har bidragit till och ibland aktivt deltagit i offentligt beslutsfattande inom flera politikområden, genom kanaler såsom remissförfarandet, deltagande i offentliga utredningar, lekmannastyrelser och rådgivande delegationer samt omfattande informella kontakter.


Det var dock inte tydligt i de nämnda reformtexterna vad exakt det var man ville förändra, eller varför tiden ansågs mogen för en förnyelse av civilsamhällets inflytande just då. Det var exempelvis oklart i vilken utsträckning reformförsöken var en reaktion på att etablerade deltagandeformer inte längre fungerade som de skulle, om de snarare var ett uttryck för ett ökat intresse för deltagande demokratiformer inom den svenska offentliga sektorn, eller om de bottade i något annat, uttalat motiv. Den här avhandlingens syfte är att beskriva och förstå motiven till och betydelsen av dessa försök att reformera det svenska civilsamhällets inflytande i offentligt beslutsfattande. Med en tolkande ansats ställs frågor om vilka motiv som har drivit reformagendan, vilka effekter berörda aktörer menar att den har fått samt hur dess inramning och utfall har påverkats av att den har skapats och spridits i nätverk bestående av lokala och nationella aktörer från både civilsamhället och offentlig sektor. Fokus ligger på berörda aktörers iakttagelser och tolkningar av reformens tillkomst och utfall inom välfärdspolitiken. Inga försök har gjorts att objektivt mäta reformens genomförande och resultat.
Utgångspunkten för studien är ett intresse för att förstå vad som driver offentliga organisationer att förändra sina syn- och arbetssätt. Ytterst handlar det om demokratiska frågor: den studerade reformen berör vilka som får komma till tals i offentligt beslutsfattande och på vilka villkor. Jag menar att det är särskilt viktigt att de underliggande motiven och upplevda effekterna av offentliga reformer synliggörs när de, som i detta fall, kan väntas få konsekvenser för demokratiskt beslutsfattande och välfärdspolitikens innehåll.


Studiens resultat
I avhandlingens slutsatser beskriver jag att reformidéernas attraktionsvärde för berörda aktörer inom offentlig sektor och det civila samhället tycks ha byggt på tre huvudsakliga egenskaper. För det första hade reformen ett symboliskt och normativt värde. Det kan åskådliggöras genom att det centrala men sällan definierade dialogbegreppet av många aktörer förknippades med positivt klingande idéer om inkludering, ömsesidighet och samverkan – ideal som i sin tur kan kopplas till det aktuella intresset för deltagande beslutsfattande som beskrivs i bl.a. governancelitteraturen. Reformspråkets symboliska och normativa associering innebar att organisationer som anammade språket och idéerna ansågs skicka signaler till omgivningen om att de var moderna, öppna och inkluderande.

För den andra av reformtexterna genom sina vaga formuleringar tolkningsbara och flexibla, vilket betydde att berörda organisationer kunde tolka dem utifrån sina olika traditioner och synsätt och i implementeringen anpassa dem efter sina respektive behov. En baksida av denna inbyggda anpassningsbarhet var att reformen kunde tolkas på så olika sätt att den ibland ansågs förlora sin ursprungliga mening. En annan nackdel var att de lösa formuleringarna gjorde det svårt att följa i vilken utsträckning reformens ambitioner hade uppnåtts. Därmed var det också svårt att se var extra insatser skulle behövas för att åtgärda brister i genomförandet.
För det tredje var reformidéerna välbekanta, i den mening att de kunde förstås som en fortsättning på och förstärkning av den etablerade svenska traditionen av intressegruppers inflytande i offentligt beslutsfattande. Därmed utgjorde de inte, i de flestas ögon, en radikal förändring av vare sig syn- eller arbetsätt, vilket gjorde dem enklare för offentliga organisationer att acceptera. Här ska dock påpekas att ett fåtal av de intervjuade aktörerna tolkade reformförslagen som en avvikelse från den svenska samverkanstraditionen och var kritiska till detta. Exempelvis ifrågasattes de demokratiska meriterna i att fasta delegationer och råd på vissa håll sas ha ersatts av ”öppnare” former av deltagande såsom hearing, vilka ansågs innebära sämre möjligheter till faktiskt inflytande för de deltagande organisationerna.

Angående huruvida reformförslagen ansågs ha förändrat något i relationen mellan civilsamhällets organisationer och offentlig sektor framträdde en blandad bild. Många intervjuade aktörer, inklusive några som initialt varit skeptiska till reformidéerna, ansåg sig ha upptäckt förbättringar i både attityder och praktik. Exempelvis menade många att såväl tjänstemän som politiker visade en större förståelse för att civilsamhällets organisationer kunde bidra med värdefull kunskap som gav bättre beslutsunderlag för offentlig sektor. Man menade att det nu fanns ett bättre förhållande mellan organisationer och offentliga sektorer.

De praktiska förändringar som togs upp i intervjuer var bland annat att många ansåg att civilsamhällets organisationerna nu erhölls möjlighet att komma till tals ofta och att offentliga organisationer i större utsträckning försökte nå fler eller var mer öppna för att ta emot olika åsikter. Exempelvis menade många att organisationerna nu erhölls möjlighet att komma till tals oftare än förut, att offentliga organisationer i större utsträckning försökte nå fler eller var mer öppna för att ta emot olika åsikter. Det påpekades också att civilsamhällets organisationer i större utsträckning protesterade när de var missnöjda med de deltagandemöjligheter som erhölls.

Vidare ansåg flera av de intervjuade aktörerna att relationerna mellan civilsamhällets organisationer och offentlig sektor samt mellan olika aktörer inom det civila samhället hade förbättrats under senare år. Det talades exempelvis om att det nu fanns en mer självklar kontakt, mer tillit och en mer hjälpsam attityd mellan olika organisationer och aktörer. Några menade också att civilsamhällets organisationer i större utsträckning än tidigare samarbetade med varandra i sitt påverkanarbete. Det påpekades emellertid att dessa positiva effekter i första hand var märkbara för organisationer som ställt sig positiva till och aktivt deltagit i olika samverkanstraditioner, såsom framtagandet och implementeringen av den nämnda överenskommelsen.

Vid sidan av dessa positiva redogörelser framträdde en annan, mer problematisk bild av reformförslagens genomförande. För det första var det inte alla respondenter i studien som kände igen bilden av att relationen mellan civilsamhällets organisationer och offentlig sektor skulle ha förändrats till det
bättre. Några hade inte märkt av några förändringar alls, medan andra hade observerat förändringar men menade att de snarare inneburit en försämring av relationen eller av civilsamhällets påverkansmöjligheter. Här ingick både respondenter som varit nöjda med sina tidigare kontakt- eller påverkansvägar och nu var misstänkta med att de ändrades, och några som ifrågasatte reformförslagens demokratiska meriter.


Därtill, och trots den ökade medvetenhet som hänslogs till ovan, menade många intervjupersoner också att det på vissa håll i offentlig sektor fortsatte saknades kunskap om och förståelse för civilsamhällets organisationers särskilda villkor och behov. Detta ansågs negativt påverka de deltagandeformerna som erbjuds. Brist på tydlig politisk styrning och resurser för utförandet av genomsnittliga deltagandeaktiviteter lyftes också som hinder för reformidéernas genomförande.


Studien antyder därmed att det hade uppstått särkoppningar mellan den retorik som omgav civilsamhällets deltagande i välfärdspolitiken och delar av den praktik som berördas aktörer ansåg sig ha tagit del av. I vissa fall menade man att varken offentliga organisationers avsiktsförklaringar eller deras uppföljningsrapporterings gav en rättvisande bild av de faktiska deltagandemöjligheter som erbjuds. En sådan särkoping är problematisk eftersom den gör det svårt att både bedöma reformförsökens positiva utfall och avgöra var ytterligare insatser behövs.

En av de teoretiska frågor som ställs i studien rör hur olika beteendelogiker tycks ha format olika organisationers och aktörers tolkningar och genomförande av reformföröveringen. Avhandlingen lutar sig primärt mot en konstruktivistisk institutionell syn på organisationers beteende. Med detta avses den
forskningstradition som har ifrågasatt bilden av organisationer som rationella och målinriktade och i huvudsak drivna av en konsekvenslogik, i betydelsen att deras beteende styrts av vad som förväntas ge de bästa resultaten i varje given situation. Istället har den konstruktivistiska institutionella forskningen visat att organisationers beteende ofta styrts av en lämplighetslogik. Det vill säga, organisationer handlar utifrån vad som anses vara lämpligt beteende i den givna situationen enligt rådande normer och ideal. I mitt användande av detta teoretiska perspektiv har dock jag anammat en pragmatisk hållning, i meningen att jag har varit öppen för resultat som stöder både en konstruktivistisk och en rationalistisk förståelse av hur organisationer, och människorna inom dem, beter sig.

Med reservation för att det är svårt för både forskare och berörda aktörer att identifiera de faktiska drivkrafterna bakom mänskligt beteende, pekar studien på att aktörers mottagande och genomförande av reformidéerna kan förstås som drivna av både en lämplighetslogik och en konsekvenslogik. Ofta är de två så sammanblandade att det är svårt att skilja dem åt.

Exempel på hur de olika logikerna åskådliggörs i analysen ges i kapitel åtta i avhandlingen. Där argumenterar jag också för att organisationsforskningen skulle gynnas av att rikta uppmärksamhet mot hur balansen mellan olika beteendelogiker på aktörsnivå påverkar hur organisationer bemöter reformer och andra påtryckningar. Exempelvis pekar studien på en diskrepans mellan de aktörer inom offentlig sektor som hade en personlig övertygelse om att reformidéernas genomförande skulle ge kännbara, positiva effekter för deras arbete, och de som var skeptiska till reformen men anammande delar av den till följd av påtryckningar från ledning eller granskare. Den första gruppen, som däremot i någon mån kunde sägas följa en konsekvenslogik, framträdde i intervjunpersonernas betraktelser som mer benägna att lägga tid och kraft på att förbättra kvaliteten på deltagandeformerna. Den senare gruppen, som i större utsträckning tycktes följa en lämplighetslogik, framställdes som mer benägna att bedriva den typ av processer som ovan beskrivs som mindre genomtänkta eller spel för gallerierna.

Studien antydde vidare att aktörer som initialt varit reformskeptiska men som senare tagit del av positiva, väl utfördte deltagarprocesser i enlighet med reformidéerna, ofta anammande en ny inställning till civilsamhällets deltagande som både var mer positiv och mer konsekvensorienterad. En möjlig tolkning av detta är att en reforms genomförande och fortlevnad påverkas positivt av att berörda aktörers anammande av den underbyggs av en konsekvenslogik. Dessa slutsatser är mycket preliminära och därför anser jag att det här finns utrymme för vidare forskning. Jag menar att en bättre förståelse för hur olika beteendelogiker interagerar när berörda aktörer tar ställning till externa och interna påtryckningar skulle fördjupas och förbättra vår förståelse för hur tolkningar och handlanden på mikronivå påverkar hur organisationer bemöter reformförslag och andra påtryckningar.

En sådan förståelse skulle också kunna vara användbar för praktiker. I detta sammanhang skulle den exempelvis kunna påvisa vilken effekt av att uppföljningsstrukturer utformas så att de synliggör de positiva effekterna av
civilsamhällets deltagande för både relationer och beslut, samt att de synliggör och motverkar symboliska anpassningar till reformidéerna.

En annan av de teoretiska frågor som behandlas i studien är huruvida de studerade reformförsöken utgör någonting egentligt nytt i den svenska konteksten. Det vill säga, om de bör ses som avvikande från eller snarare en fortsättning på den svenska traditionen av intressegruppens deltagande i offentligt beslutsfattande. Syftet med denna fråga är att bidra till de diskussioner som förts inom governanceforskningen om i vilken utsträckning governancereformer i praktiken har tillfört någonting nytt i Sverige.

Här konstaterar jag, i linje med flera andra forskare på området, att även om idén om att civilsamhällets organisationer bör komma till tals i offentligt beslutsfattande inte är ny i Sverige, så har denna och liknande reformer tillfört nya perspektiv på hur sådana aktiviteter ska se ut. Ett exempel på vad som kan anses nytt i den aktuella reformen är ambitionen att involvera fler delar av det svenska civilsamhället, inklusive små och tillfälliga organisationer och nätverk. Detta kan tolkas som en avvikelse från den vedertagna traditionen att prioritera större, etablerade organisationer med en tydlig demokratisk struktur i samtal med det offentliga.

Ett annat exempel är förslaget om att civilsamhället bör erbjudas möjlighet att bidra tidigare eller oftare i beslutsprocesser, vilket skiljer sig från traditionen att deltagandemöjligheter erbjuds enligt formaliserade scheman, utformade efter beslutsfattares behov.

Ett annat exempel på vad som kan tolkas som nytt i de studerade reformförsöken är den antydda förändringen i vilka demokratiska värden som prioriteras. Studien pekar på att det har skett ett visst skifte i fokus i utformandet av deltagandeaktiviteter, från att man prioriterar representativitet, med tydliga ramar för vilka organisationer som deltar, till att mer vikt ges till värden som öppenhet och inkludering. En påstådd konsekvens av detta var att reformidéernas genomförande i vissa fall ansågs leda till en uttunning, snarare än förstärkning, av civilsamhällets inflytande i politiken. Ett exempel som gavs var när välfungerande fora för samverkan sas ha ersatts med nya, öppnare former med sämre möjligheter till påverkan.

Avhandlingen pekar därmed på att de studerade reformidéerna ställer berörda aktörer inför avvåningar mellan olika demokratiska ideal. Dock har dessa avvägningar och deras betydelse för den svenska demokratiska modellen upptagit förvånansvärt lite utrymme både i de reformtexter som analyserats i studien och i intervjuupphandlingarna. I mina slutsatser föreslår jag därför att både governanceforskare och praktiker skulle gynnas av att ägna mer uppmärksamhet åt hur olika demokratideal presenteras, förstås och balanseras när idéer om nätverkstillstånd genomförs i den svenska kontexten. Inte minst skulle sådana undersökningar dra fördel av att studera hur enskilda aktörer ser på vad som utgör demokratiskt beslutsfattande och hur deras personliga värderingar påverkar hur de tolkar och genomför dessa reformer.
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