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**PUBLIC POLICY EVALUATION IN  
SWEDEN**

by

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## **Introduction - The Swedish Welfare Strategy**

There are several pressing reasons for Sweden to be particularly concerned about the evaluation of public policy.

Tax rates and public spending shares are the highest in the world. More than 70 percent of total income is channeled through public budgets.

Compared to other West European countries the Swedish welfare strategy is much more based on the provision of free public services, implying relatively more public employment, more long-term and inflexible commitment of public funds.

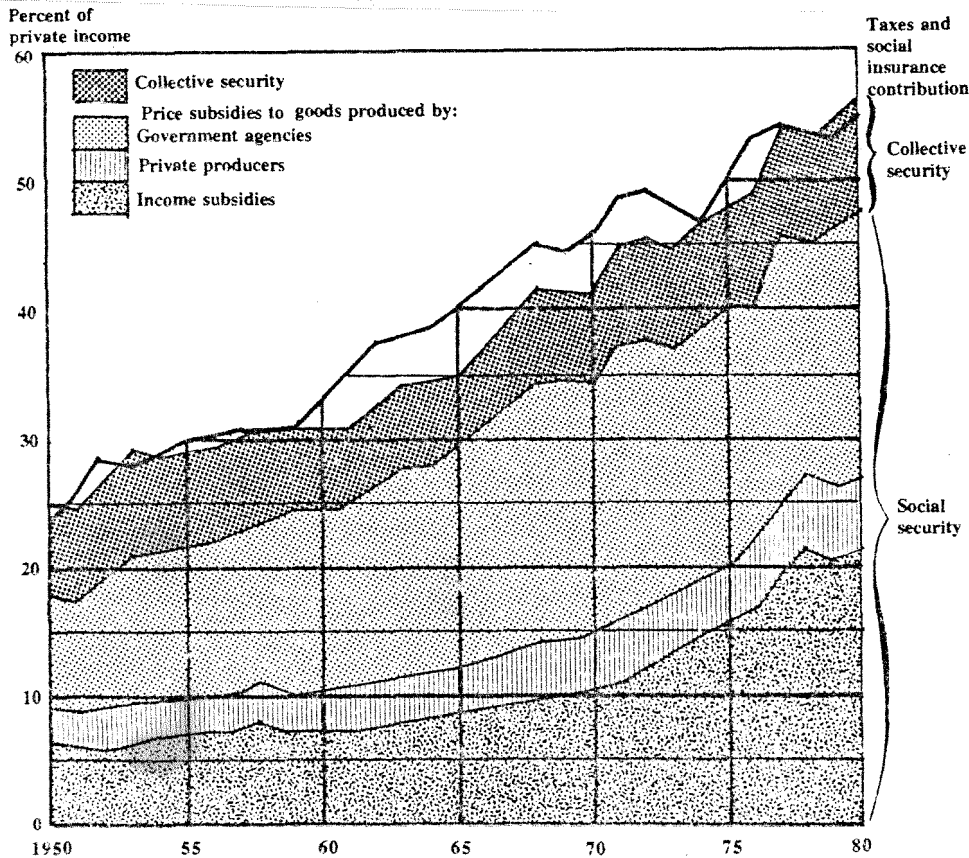
Partly as a consequence of the remaining industrial stagnation, the Swedish state budget deficit was, up till 1983, mounting faster than in any other West European country. To stop the debt from rising faster than income will require a very tight-fisted fiscal policy over the next 6-7 years even with favorable world economic development.

These special Swedish concerns, as well as some policy trends in common with other West European countries, are illustrated in Figure 1.

The figure shows the rapid expansion of the Swedish public budgets and the high proportion of expenditure used for price subsidies in general and public consumption in particular.

The share of income used for collective security has remained more or less constant over the whole period, around 10 percent. The dramatic expansion of the public

**Figure 1 The Swedish Welfare Strategy - The Use of Taxes 1950-80<sup>a</sup>**



<sup>a</sup> In the figure all public expenditures of a non-business, non-contractual nature - excluding e.g. interest payments and net lending - have been grouped in two main categories - collective security and social security. Under the general heading of collective security, all current and investment expenditures for defense and foreign policy, general administration, judiciary system and fire service have been counted. All other expenditures are subsumed under the heading of social security, and are assumed to be mainly concerned with guaranteeing or preserving individual standards. Social security expenditures have been further broken down into two categories, "income subsidies" or direct transfers to households and "price subsidies". There are, finally, two kinds of price subsidies. The major part, called public consumption and related investments in the national accounts, goes to Government agencies, producing various types of social services in education, health, social welfare, roads, etc. The rest are subsidies for current or investment expenditures within the private sector, e.g. for housing and food, for public utilities, or for ailing industries. A thick line at the top shows the development of income from taxes and social insurance contributions. All budget items are displayed as shares of private income ([32,33]).

Source: Ysander-Robinson, 1982.

budget share has been entirely due to the increase in social security expenditure which has almost trippled its share during the 30 years.

Most social security expenditures can be said to be ultimately concerned with redistributing real income. This may take the form of insuring against social and economic risks, redistributing resources over the individual's lifetime or shifting the levels of life income prospects between individuals directly by taxes and transfers or by changes in relative prices. This is pertinent to the theme here, since it means that the dominant part of the policies we may want to evaluate are focused on distributive effects. One reason why policy makers so far have often tended to be unappreciative towards attempts at economic policy evaluations may indeed be the fact while the policy makers' main preoccupation has to do with feasible redistributions, the economists tend to treat redistribution as a side-issue or restriction for their main concern which is efficiency and/or macroeconomic stabilization.

### **Policy Evaluation in a Swedish Context<sup>1</sup>**

Policy evaluation is - or rather should be - a normal link in the chain of policy making. The policy cycle is started up with what we can here call policy analysis - the ex ante evaluation of options on which the policy decision is based. Then comes the implementation and finally the ex post evaluation - the theme of our discussion here - feeding back to and hopefully improving both policy analysis and implementation in the next stage of policy making ([8, 31]).

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<sup>1</sup> For an alternative resumé of the Swedish experience in public policy evaluation cf. Premfors [25].

What one ultimately wants to evaluate is what we may call the social effectiveness of the implemented policy, i.e. how it effects present and future welfare of different individuals and groups in the community. In most cases this can be equated with measuring its impact on the size and distribution of real income, if we interpret real income in the broad sense as a general measure of the individual's own valuation of his standard and living conditions. There may of course in practice be effects - e.g. the policy impact on economic and social structure and on the decision making process - that are relevant but can't easily be translated into terms of real income.

A very rough, but often useful distinction can also be made between, on the one hand, policy effectiveness and, on the other hand, implementation or management efficiency. The first is concerned with the social effectiveness of the choice of a policy plan i.e. of a certain set of means and targets - laws and regulations, tax and transfer rules, resources and directives for service provision etc. - given an efficient implementation. The second measures the social efficiency of managing the policies and implementing the plans, of interpreting rules and utilizing given resources. A good deal can be learned about management efficiency by only looking inside Government offices. Evaluating policy effectiveness, on the other hand, almost invariably requires "field studies" of the policy impact on private individuals and organizations ([10, 11]).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The reader will notice that, contrary to the practice among business economists, we here use effectiveness as a broader concept than efficiency, encompassing also distributional considerations. The simplified distinction used above thus disregards the fact that implementation decision on the management level may also have important distributional consequences. For an extensive discussion of efficiency concepts and their applications to public administration cf. Jackson [14].

In evaluating efficiency in the private economy, economists often argue that, at least in the short run, welfare losses due to misallocation between different goods and services are negligible compared to the losses due to inefficient resource use within each line of production ([16]). There are reasons to assume that the opposite could well apply to the public economy. Even apart from the distortions due to taxes and subsidies, there are the equally well-known problems involved in "filtering" preferences through a representative democracy and its bureaucratic machinery. Intuitively one would therefore expect the "non-market failures" to be far greater than the "market failures".

At least in Sweden, public opinion undoubtedly tends to regard the problem of inefficient public administration as rather limited compared to the risks of ineffective policy choices.

The bogey of inefficient public bureaucracy seems to be less prevalent in Sweden than in most other countries - both in reality and in people's minds. Many factors may contribute to this. The small and homogeneous Swedish society was only recently industrialized and urbanized. Traditions of collective care from the village community may have carried over to the modern public sector, while the overgrowth of accumulated central administration has not yet appeared. The public sector is moreover mainly associated with health and education - status goods in expanding demand. Compared to most other countries public policy in Sweden is also more decentralized. The relatively independent local authorities, municipalities and counties, are responsible for more than two thirds of all public consumption ([34]). Even central Government power is decentralized, policies being mainly ex-

ecuted, and often also initiated, by the rather independent national agencies.

While possibly decreasing the risk for public mismanagement, these factors also tend to limit the efforts to evaluate policy effectiveness. Being a small country means that, although we may have a number of domestic policy-issues comparable to that of a much larger country, our resources for specialized policy research are much more limited. Decentralization, on the other hand, may provide a convenient alibi for not even trying. According to the conventional wisdom of Swedish politicians, decentralized decision-making is often viewed as a substitute for policy evaluation. Public reactions to policies supposedly get more immediate attention, when decisions are made "closer to the market".

There are two further facets of Swedish postwar politics, that have probably tended to lessen the interest in evaluating or reappraising basic policies.

One is the consensus tradition in Swedish politics. Many of our political institutions have been tailor-made for the task of producing consensus decisions. Major vehicles for this effort are the Swedish Govt. Commissions. At any time there are 2-300 of these sitting, with an average lifetime of 3-4 years.<sup>1</sup> They are comprised of MPs and representatives of different interest groups and have the task to prepare - and negotiate - major policy changes and new legislation. They contract outside experts to review the past or develop new options, but are usually narrowly limited by Government directives. Consensus politics mean that decision-making takes time and can include evaluation of past policies. But once

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<sup>1</sup> 206 Govt. Commissions were at work in the autumn 1983. Efforts are being made to speed up the investigative process, aiming at a maximum lifetime of 2 years.

decisions are taken, no party may be interested in stirring up trouble by reappraising basic policies.

Major policy decisions usually represent a heavy investment in terms of political credit. Even if policy change essentially affects means and not aims, it usually requires a certain amount of indoctrination to ensure support and acceptance. It is therefore not really surprising if there is no enthusiasm among the responsible parties for checking the arguments against facts by evaluating the policy.<sup>1</sup>

Another simple reason why serious reappraisals and evaluations of basic policies were scarce in Sweden, at least up to the late 1970s, was the fact that we were too busy at the time expanding the policies. The very rapid economic growth experienced in the 50s, 60s and early 70s, focused political interest on policy expansion and incremental change rather than on policy restructuring and alternative options. This necessarily limited the possibilities of evaluation by narrowing the range of "experimental variation" in the available data.

You can't, strictly speaking, evaluate policies as such - only policy changes or policy differences. Evaluation basically means making a "before and after" analysis on panel data and/or comparing outcome for some group affected by a policy with some unaffected "control group". How much you can learn for sure about the impact of a certain policy parameter - say a tax or transfer scale

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<sup>1</sup> Tarschys [29] provides a stimulating discussion of the waxing and waning of political interest in policy evaluation during different phases of policy-making.



or some selection criteria for public works - depends on how much you vary its value in time and space.<sup>1</sup>

### **From Evaluating Program Expansion to Reappraising Problems**

You can discern two distinct phases in the development of policy evaluation in Sweden. 1960 to the late 70s and from the late 70s onwards.

Before 1960 there were no systematic and continuous efforts at evaluation made by the Government. Whatever sporadic evaluations that occurred were usually initiated by some Govt. Commission to find arguments to replace some time-worn piece of legislation. The monitoring of public administration by the National Audit Bureau was limited to safe-guarding the interest of fiscal regularity and public accountability - to what is nowadays often termed compliance auditing.

1960 to the late 70s could be called the period of evaluating program expansion. It was a period of fast economic growth in Sweden with the public sector, particularly the local authorities expanding almost twice as fast as GNP. The policy problems were all problems of

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<sup>1</sup> To some extent this "dilemma" of policy evaluation will of course always be present. Policy changes are usually incremental and packaged together. This makes it hard to differentiate between the impact of individual changes and means that it is difficult to arrive at overall judgements on the choice between policy options, although that is often the most urgent and relevant problem. Policy makers tend to be trapped in the sense that they don't dare make too drastic changes without any sure knowledge about the consequences but will never get that knowledge without making the changes. Sophisticated statistical and econometric methods and simulation techniques can make the trap easier to live with but can't open it.

expansion. How to organize a trebling of university students and yet have room for an even faster growth of adult studies? How to extend health and welfare services and pension schemes to prepare for a doubling of the number of old-age people? How to build up a system of public child-care to make possible a doubling of the women participation rate, needed to replenish an overheated labor market? How to expand and improve labor market exchanges and training to make for better matching and more mobility? How to secure a better regional balance of the rapidly rising industrial investments? - And not the least worry: How to reform and reorganize public administration to be able to cope efficiently with all these new tasks?

The last problem concerns the management effectiveness of public administration, for which, on the national level, the National Audit Bureau is mainly responsible in Sweden. This is where things first started to move in the 60s, partly due to the PPBS-ideas then in vogue.

Contrary to what happened in for instance the Anglo-Saxon countries, PPBS was developed and introduced in Sweden not mainly as an instrument for central Government policy making, but as a way of decentralizing the administration and as a tool for improving efficiency on agency level. Program budgeting became an accepted routine for an increasing number of agencies and provided an impetus for the development of effectiveness auditing within the National Audit Bureau. A unified scheme for program cost accounting and internal program reviews was successively introduced in the agencies. The National Audit Bureau more and more transferred its resources to making selective checks on the agency decision-making by reviewing the progress of programs. These developments undoubtedly contributed to improved management effectiveness. The risk of inflexibility and "in-built" expan-

sion, always inherent in the PPBS approach, does however still remain a problem, although efforts have been made to diminish it by i.a. requiring agencies to plan also for program reductions ([3, 20, 22]). Another remaining problem is investment appraisal, where practices still vary and are often far removed from the ideals of handbook instructions.

If we go from agency level to cabinet level, from evaluation of management effectiveness to the evaluation of policy effectiveness, some new approaches were also tried during this period. To complement the ad hoc studies of the Govt. Commissions, several of the large ministries started up their own R&D committees, giving them a semi-independent and semi-permanent status. Composed of a mixture of experts and civil servants and given separate funding, the task of these committees were to monitor and initiate research in policy-relevant areas. Most of the policy evaluation at this time emanated from these committees or from the parallel R&D-committees established within some of the national agencies concerned. The problems addressed by these evaluations often had to do with the consequences of program extension, of incremental change.

The actual record from this period in Sweden of serious evaluation of policy effectiveness is however far from impressive. Most of the work labeled as evaluation is concerned with registering partial effects, often by rather impressionistic methods. There is moreover no discernible upward trend in regard to quantitative evaluation work. Some pioneering attempts at statistical analysis of program effects were made in the early 70s ([4, 5, 15]) in the area of labor market policy and social welfare policy. We have, however, nothing to match the steady outflow of studies and the rapid development of statistical evaluation methods, achieved in

these fields in the United States ever since the negative income tax experiments ([13, 26]). In social welfare policy there were many experiments carried out locally or in pilot projects, but these experiments were seldom used as a basis for a full scale evaluation. Economic evaluations of medicines and medical treatments did however become increasingly frequent. A common problem which we have as yet done little to solve, concerns the paucity in Sweden of relevant and reliable panel data. The lack of good data is also the excuse often used to explain the very small amount of evaluative work in the field of taxes and transfers.

Education has traditionally been an area where much policy evaluation work has been carried out by pedagogues, sociologists and political scientists - but very seldom by economists. Particularly within university education, policy changes and reform evaluations have been frequent in the postwar years ([8, 19, 23]).

The year 1976 marks a break with tradition in Sweden both economically and politically. The long period of postwar prosperity was succeeded by industrial stagnation. A bourgeois Government was elected after more than forty years of socialist hegemony.

From the point of view of policy evaluation the period starting in the late 70s could be characterized as a period of reappraisals. The mounting economic and financial problems, and the frequent changes in Government, have made it not only possible but necessary to reappraise basic policies and question conventional wisdom [21]. The political consensus is breaking apart and the climate of opinion is undergoing drastic changes, although not without encountering resistance and engendering internal conflict, particularly within the socialist camp.

This has led not only to a heightened interest in policy evaluation but also to a change of direction of the evaluation work. From having been mainly "program-oriented", evaluation work is becoming increasingly "problem-oriented". Instead of starting at the top level with an individual program and following it down the line to its final execution, trying to measure its differential impact on individuals and firm, you now often tend to go the other way around. You start with studying the accumulative impact of all public rules and provisions on a specific problem area - say e.g. the day care of children, the firms' investment, the employment debute of youngsters, the income maintenance of poor pensioners, etc. You may find you are overshooting your target or that some targets are becoming obsolete, that different policies and agencies are overlapping and partly neutralizing each other. You can try to reformulate the problem and the policy criteria and to use them for re-appraising the whole policy package, perhaps ending up with new solutions.

On the management level, this has meant new ambitions for the National Audit Bureau, which is now allowed to look, not only at individual agencies and programs, but to reappraise the efficiency of program and agency structure. The National Audit Bureau has now established routines for computing total public transfers for various types of households and firms, is mapping the maze of public rules surrounding private building activities, and is studying the effects of diverse licensing laws and of the deregulation attempts so far carried out. The study of organizational alternatives for public administration and public ownership control, traditionally the responsibility of the Swedish Agency for Administrative Development is also attracting an increasing interest.

On the policy-making level there is a new interest in evaluating whole policy systems by comparing them with radically different alternatives. The Treasury has recently established its own R&D-committee, using it both as a source and a sounding-board for new policy options. Its interest extends to the appraising of new transfer structures and new models for social insurance.

Table 1 presents in a summary fashion the various modes of public policy evaluation mentioned above. In terms of this table the Swedish development since 1960 could be characterized as a shift of emphasis "downwards" - from management regularity to policy effectiveness - and "to the left" - from program-orientation to problem-orientation.

**Table 1**            **Different modes of public policy evaluation<sup>1</sup>**

Object of study	Method of approach	Program-oriented study of incremental change	Problem-oriented study of intra-marginal change
Management regularity		Compliance auditing	Studies of budgetary control systems
Management efficiency		Management auditing. Cost-effectiveness studies	Studies of bureaucratic systems
Policy effectiveness  (Allocative efficiency, distributional effects)		Effectiveness auditing  Program evaluation  Cost-benefit analysis	Social welfare studies. Total impact studies of public policy Studies of alternative modes of financing and distributing public services and insurance

<sup>1</sup> For a more elaborate classification scheme for public evaluation cf. e.g. Ahonen [1].

However beneficial the more synoptic reappraisals may be, they cannot however replace the painstaking work of analysing program impacts. Unfortunately that kind of work has not progressed in late years, and no effort has been made to build up the necessary foundations in terms of good panel data and trained evaluators.

In the case of labor market policy and social welfare policy very little has been done to continue the kind of statistical analysis initiated in the early 70s.

The one field where there has indeed been a sudden and fast increase of evaluation work during recent years is energy policy. There has been a flood of energy research money and part of this plethora has been channeled into policy and project evaluation work ([2, 30, 35]).

The development in policy analysis during the last decade has also been disappointing. Benefit-cost analysis has so far become an administrative routine only in the National Road Agency and meticulous benefit-cost work on public projects are rare and far between ([7]). The same is true for policy analysis using large scale simulation models, although an increasing interest has been noticed in the last few years ([35, 36]). There is of course a close connection between developments in policy analysis and policy evaluation. Evaluating policy basically always means evaluating a social experiment. It is then obviously important to know, by policy analysis, the design and expected impact of the experiment, to be able to plan and carry out a relevant and correct evaluation. At the same time you need the hard facts gained from policy evaluation to be able to devise and analyze your policy options adequately.

## **How Evaluation is Organized**

The developments we have just described are reflected in the organizational structure of evaluation work, as represented in Figure 2.

### Parliament and Cabinet

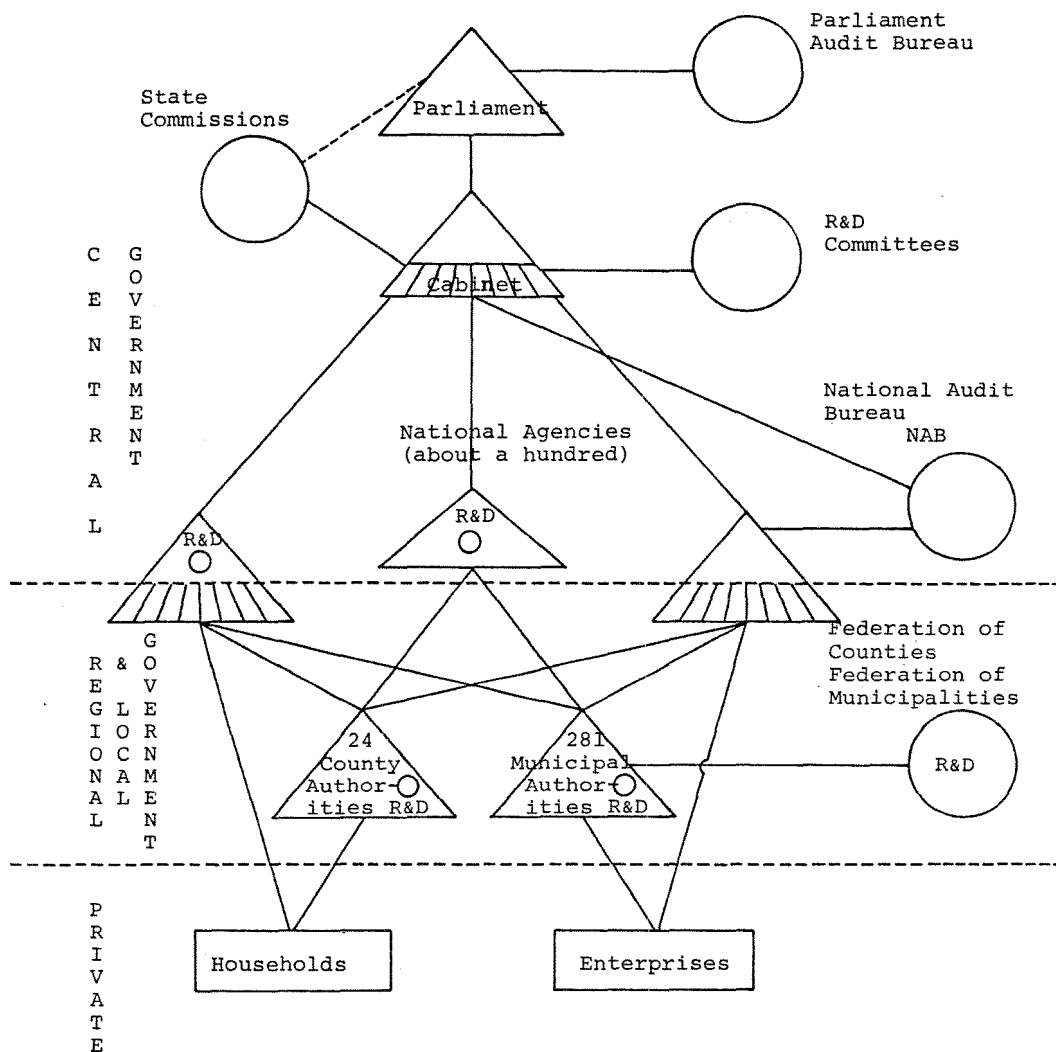
The Parliament Audit Bureau is a very small outfit working under the direction of a board of MPs. Both its limited size, and the need for its products to pass muster with the various political parties, have so far tended to make its role in policy evaluation rather marginal. This also reflects the relative weakening of parliament's position vis-à-vis government, which has taken place during the last half-century, and which has not yet been totally reversed despite the frequent changes of government and the precarious parliamentary balance in late years.

The traditional and still dominant vehicles for policy evaluations in Sweden are the Govt. Commissions already touched upon.

As we already pointed out above, both the government directives and the short time span of the commissions, usually put narrow limits on the extension, depth and scientific worth of the evaluations carried out. Since perhaps the most important function of a commission is to prepare the way for a consensus decision in parliament, by political negotiations and log-rolling, the expert arguments may often be used more as political ammunition than as an objective basis for decision ([24]).



**Figure 2 The Swedish Organizational Structure**



△ Public policy-making organisations

○ Organisations responsible for evaluating public policies

The second important source of policy evaluations on cabinet level are the temporary R&D-committees, set up by ministries like Justies (BRÅ), Labor (EFA), Industry (ERU), Social Welfare (DSF) and Treasury (ESO).

### National Agencies

A Swedish minister of state has a position and a framework of power very different from, say, that of his French counterpart. All cabinet decisions are taken collectively, and the minister's own staff at the ministry will only comprise 40-100 people, counting all categories. Most executive work is handled by the associated national agencies, which, according to a tradition with roots in the seventeenth century, enjoy a high degree of freedom and protection from direct ministerial intervention. There are about a hundred such national agencies and a couple of hundreds minor organs on the same national level. Having received their annual appropriations and ordinance, they are responsible for current resource allocation and for issuing regulations and directives to local authorities and private organizations. Some of the major agencies also have a large regional - and in some instances even local - organization.

As we already noted above, evaluation work on the agency level is mostly concerned with management effectiveness, with a meeting of set targets and with the efficiency of internal resource utilization. Outside evaluation of the work of the agencies is a responsibility of the National Audit Bureau backed up by the Swedish Agency for Administrative Development in case of major administrative restructuring and reorganizations.

Regional and Local

Although relatively independent in international comparison, the activities of the Swedish counties and municipalities are circumscribed by state regulations and statutory obligations, limiting their freedom of action and with that their incentive for policy evaluations. Around 70 percent of local expenditures are somehow regulated and subsidized - some 30 percent of these regulated expenditures being on the average payed by the state. Particularly heavily subsidized and regulated are the comprehensive schools and highschoools in the municipalities, and the medical services, which are the main responsibility of the counties.

The main emphasis in the internal auditing and reviewing within local authorities is therefore on what we have called management effectiveness. The time since the municipal mergers in the beginning of the 70s - when the number of municipal units was reduced to a third - has been used to build up better and more unified systems for cost accounting and financial management.

A number of counties and some of the major municipalities in metropolitan areas do however have their own R&D units, used particularly for planning and evaluating heavy investments and for mapping local flows in the labor market and in the communication networks. The exchange of experience and the development of new methods is also to some extent supported by the two national federations of local authorities, utilizing both their own staff and that of separately organized R&D units.

### Decentralization and Fragmentation

The rather slow progress of policy evaluation work in Sweden is undoubtedly connected with its decentralized and fragmented organization.

The relatively decentralized structure of Swedish Government has eased the pressure on central government for policy evaluations. Evaluations of policies, for which responsibility rests with the local authorities, may e.g. often be considered not only less urgent but even politically unsuitable for organs of central government. The attempts in postwar years to have the interest group or client representatives directly involved, on different levels, in the work of the National Agencies, have likewise often been viewed as a way of getting a more direct feed-back on policy-making from policy impacts.

There is always a political tug-of-war between, on the one hand, the groups clamoring for centralized regulations and resources to protect their interests or the equality of standards and, on the other hand, the more general pressure for decentralization and deregulation in the name of efficiency and freedom ([27, 28]). The last decade of Swedish politics has witnessed strong swings in both directions with restrictive labor market legislation and heavy industrial subsidies on the one hand, and on the other, a stream of actual or proposed deregulation measures following in the wake of an international fashion. A good deal of the evaluation research during the time has in fact been focused on these changes in the power structure.

The Swedish organization of policy evaluation is also very fragmented. A major part of the evaluation work is initiated and financed by temporary government committees and commissions. These typically have not only a very

limited budget, but also a short time horizon and rather narrow political directives. They have in most cases been set up to investigate a specific proposal and any evaluation work done will be viewed mainly as a way of providing a starting point for reviewing future options. Evaluations of past policies will therefore tend to be not only very limited in coverage but also very superficial, relying in most cases on a review of already documented experiences. No individual commission will have the right, the resources or the patience to conduct a full-scale statistical post mortem on principle policy choices in the past. Neither will they usually plan their proposals in such a way as to prepare the way for later evaluation ([24]). It is true that references to evaluation requirements have become increasingly frequent in government policy documents, but so far these requirements seem in most cases to have been interpreted as related to management efficiency rather than policy efficiency.<sup>1</sup>

The fragmented organization makes evaluation difficult also in another way. There are increasing returns to scale in evaluation work in the sense that everybody can benefit from the production of good economic and social data and from the building up of a common body of expertise within government. Individual committees etc. can reap the benefits of such common resources but can't usually by themselves do much to produce them.

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<sup>1</sup> This conclusion has been drawn from a survey of the ministries, carried out in September 1983 by the Committee for Studies on Public Finance (ESO) on behalf of the author.

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