

The Developmental Welfare State in Scandinavia

Lessons for the Developing World

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Acronyms

ESO	Expert Group on Public Finance
GDP	gross domestic product
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISSA	International Social Security Association
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

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Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

Is there a Scandinavian route from the era of semi-feudal societies and absolutist states to contemporary societies with democratic regimes, affluent economies and comprehensive welfare states? This paper traces crucial steps in the history of the Scandinavian welfare state from its early beginnings in the late nineteenth century to the present time. Particular attention is drawn to the general adherence to the principle of universalism.

It shows that development was piecemeal toward the post-Second World War comprehensive welfare state characterized by the principle of universalism and a strong role for the state and local government. A strong social role for the state was not incommensurate with economic development—economic growth and the institutionalization of comprehensive social security and welfare services programmes *could* develop hand in hand.

The construction of the welfare state was gradual and a continuous balancing act between stimulating economic development and promoting social justice. During periods of economic downturn and setbacks in the most recent decades, modifications were made to programmes and benefit structures, and some programmes were expanded.

The Scandinavian welfare state has remained comprehensive and, on the whole, rather generous. Although there has been criticism of its scope, the welfare state remains popular, and most politicians from various political parties will defend it on moral, political and economic grounds. The Scandinavian historical experience cannot be copied, and the characteristics and goals of the Scandinavian welfare state may not be universal, but the Scandinavian route to a modern democratic welfare state does still offer some general lessons as to interrelationships between political, economic and social development.

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Résumé

Y a-t-il un modèle scandinave à suivre pour passer de sociétés semi-féodales et d'Etats absolutistes aux régimes démocratiques, aux économies prospères et aux Etats providence complets de l'époque contemporaine? Ce document retrace les étapes cruciales de l'histoire de l'Etat providence scandinave, depuis ses débuts, à la fin du XIX^{ème} siècle, à nos jours. L'accent est particulièrement mis sur l'adhésion générale au principe d'universalisme.

Il montre que l'évolution qui a abouti, après la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, à un Etat providence complet, acquis au principe d'universalisme et caractérisé par un Etat et un gouvernement local forts, n'a pas été linéaire ni très cohérente. L'engagement social de l'Etat n'a pas été étranger au développement économique—la croissance économique et l'institutionnalisation de programmes complets de sécurité sociale et de services de protection sociale *ont pu* aller de pair.

L'Etat providence s'est construit peu à peu, en s'efforçant constamment de concilier développement économique et justice sociale. Pendant les périodes de récession économique et de déconvenue des dernières décennies, des modifications ont été apportées aux programmes, dont certains ont été élargis, et à la structure des bénéficiaires.

L'Etat providence scandinave continue à offrir une protection sociale complète et reste, dans l'ensemble, assez généreux. Bien que l'étendue de son action ait été critiquée, il reste populaire, et la plus grande partie de la classe politique, tous partis confondus, le défend pour des raisons morales, politiques et économiques. L'histoire scandinave n'est pas reproductible, et les caracté-

ristiques et objectifs de l'Etat providence scandinave ne sont peut-être pas universels, mais le cheminement suivi par la Scandinavie pour parvenir à l'Etat providence de démocraties modernes permet cependant de tirer des enseignements généraux quant aux rapports entre l'évolution politique et le développement économique et social.

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Resumen

¿Qué trayectoria han seguido los países escandinavos para pasar de la era de las sociedades semifeudales y los estados absolutistas a las sociedades contemporáneas caracterizadas por regímenes democráticos, economías prósperas y estados de bienestar general? En este documento se analizan las etapas fundamentales de la historia del estado de bienestar que prevalece en los países escandinavos, desde sus comienzos a finales del siglo XIX hasta la actualidad. Se presta particular atención a la adhesión general de estos países al principio del universalismo.

El documento muestra que el desarrollo fue gradual hasta lograr el estado de bienestar general posterior a la Segunda Guerra Mundial, caracterizado por el principio del universalismo y por el importante papel que desempeñan el Estado y el gobierno local. Que el Estado tuviera un papel social importante no era incompatible con el desarrollo económico—el crecimiento económico y la institucionalización de amplios programas de servicios de bienestar y de seguridad social *podían* ir de la mano.

La construcción del estado de bienestar fue gradual y era necesario mantener un constante equilibrio entre la estimulación del desarrollo económico y la promoción de la justicia social. Durante los períodos de cambio desfavorable de la coyuntura y de dificultades económicas en los últimos decenios, se modificaron los programas y las estructuras de prestaciones, y algunos programas se ampliaron.

El estado de bienestar de los países escandinavos sigue siendo general y, en su conjunto, más bien generoso. Aunque se ha criticado su alcance, sigue siendo popular, y la mayoría de los políticos de diversos partidos lo defenderán por motivos morales, políticos y económicos. La experiencia histórica de los países escandinavos es única e irrepetible, y las características y objetivos del estado de bienestar de estos países pueden no ser universales, pero la trayectoria que han seguido para lograr un estado de bienestar democrático moderno siguen ofreciendo algunas lecciones generales con respecto a las relaciones que existen entre el desarrollo político, económico y social.

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Introduction

There has long been a “developmental” accent to welfare policy in Scandinavia, and there are obvious similarities – as well as differences – between the notion of the developmental state of the pre-1989 “Third World” of the post-war era and the historical origins of the advanced welfare state in the far north of Europe. Hence, in a century-long perspective, a strong social and democratic state has not been antithetical to modern values underpinning the security and well-being of the market: personal freedoms, private initiative and individual property rights – and thus private entrepreneurship and rapid industrialization (Kuhnle et al. 2003; see also Hort and Kuhnle 2000). A “middle” and later “third way” that combined a capitalist market economy with active state intervention contributed to create big, successful international firms as well as growing affluence among the great majority of the population. Thus, the early Nordic (pre-)welfare state shared many of the characteristics typical of successful examples of the later developmental state of the global South.

Throughout the twentieth century, the scope of social planning in Scandinavia continuously expanded, with the aim of achieving balanced economic and social development – that is to say, economic growth as well as social justice. Thus, fighting poverty went hand in hand with state institution building for social and economic growth as well as political democracy, and was pioneered by broad-based popular social movements (Olsson 1993). New, tax-financed social programmes were always launched with a strong emphasis on their impact on macroeconomic efficiency and individual work incentives. For instance, the breakthrough of social policy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a competitive edge directed against the emigration of skilled labour to North America, while the housing and population policies of the 1930s had a “productivist” emphasis on the upbringing and maintenance of the future and current labour force, respectively (Myrdal and Myrdal 1934). However, it was not until the emergence of the full employment or active labour market policy of the 1950s and 1960s and the expansion of “the public sector” – comprehensive state education as well as public health – that a thoroughly coherent developmental perspective on economic prosperity and social change became part and parcel of welfare state philosophy (Kuusi 1964; see also Therborn 1986). Thus, at least since the last quarter of the twentieth century, this has characterized welfare state theory and practice in general from child to disability policy – or “from the cradle to the grave”, as the saying goes, about the universal Scandinavian welfare model. Moreover, during the rather painful reconstruction of the welfare state during the last decades of the twentieth century, the relationship between economic growth and social development was an important topic on the public agenda throughout Scandinavia. So far, however, the policy balance and conflict between efficiency and equality have in most cases been resolved and maintained in the five Nordic countries.

Owing to the intertwined history of the Nordic geographical area and the subsequent common cultural patterns, the concept of Scandinavia is often used in a broad sense to include Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The area constitutes almost one third of the total area of Western Europe, but only about 5 per cent of its population. Its common history originates from the sea. In the past, these states or territories were not separated, but rather bound together by the sea, which connected them with the European core areas and the rest of the world. The Scandinavian region became linked to the European world economy when the Hanseatic, Dutch and British merchants found their way to these northern shores. Even today, the sea is of tremendous importance to the area (Alestalo and Kuhnle 1987).

With their small populations and relatively scarce resources, Scandinavian countries have developed various institutions and cultural patterns of their own; in many studies of contemporary societies, they are considered to be distinct examples of developed welfare states. In each of the many attempts to classify welfare states into meaningful typologies, all Scandinavian (Nordic) countries end up in the same category, but with varying labels: “social democratic”,

“Scandinavian”, “Nordic”, “protestant social democratic”, “non-right hegemony”, “encompassing” and so on (Arts and Gelissen 2002).¹

The authors subscribe to the view that there is such a thing as a Scandinavian-type welfare state, whose core has been characterized as lying in “broad public participation in various areas of economic and social life, the purpose of which is to promote economic efficiency, to improve the ability of society to master its problems, and to enrich and equalize the living conditions of individuals and families. In social policy, the cornerstone of the model is universalism” (Erikson et al. 1987:vii). By universalism is meant that the Scandinavian countries have set out to develop a welfare state that includes the entire population. In short,

global programmes are preferred to selective ones: free or cheap education for all in publicly owned educational institutions with a standard sufficiently high to discourage the demand for private schooling; free or cheap health care on the same basis; child allowances for all families with children rather than income-tested aid for poor mothers; universal old-age pensions, including pension rights for housewives and others who have not been in gainful employment; general housing policies rather than “public housing” (Erikson et al. 1987:vii-viii).

Although the Swedish case has been identified as the empirical embodiment of the Scandinavian type of welfare state since the mid-1930s, in fact all five Nordic countries took off in the same developmental direction during the 1930s. They all got their crisis compromises in that decade, leading to new tension-reducing institutional solutions for mediation between agricultural and industrial interests, as well as between the interests of organized labour and employers. This is the Nordic *Sonderweg* (special way): crucial steps, unique in Europe, toward building a broad political consensus on a platform of state-regulated socially modified capitalism were taken before the Second World War (Kildal and Kuhnle 2002).

Kuhnle (1990) lists 11 components of welfare systems that—taken together, but with partial exceptions (Iceland in particular in terms of size of the public sector)—set Scandinavian/Nordic countries apart from other welfare states. Among these are the relative size of governmental welfare provision; size of welfare employment (broadly speaking); public employment as a proportion of total employment; redistribution; high legitimacy for state/public welfare provision; and universal citizenship-based social rights. “Their universal embrace has anchored the Scandinavian welfare states’ claim to a special status” (Baldwin 1990:51–52), but the principle of universalism is also part of the Beveridgean post-Second World War development in Britain and, indeed, Scandinavian post-war developments are partly inspired, or accelerated, by W.H. Beveridge (1942) and the introduction of the National Health Insurance scheme in the United Kingdom in 1948.

Esping-Andersen and Korpi (1987) label the Scandinavian welfare states “institutional welfare states”—as a contrast to “marginal” or “residual” welfare states and the “corporatist” or so-called

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