



Discourses on municipal protection and safety work prior to the introduction of the ‘Civil Protection Act Against Accidents’ and five years later



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ABSTRACT

The “Civil Protection Act Against Accidents” entered into force in 2004 in Sweden, and stipulates management by objectives, risk analysis work, political prioritizations, and cross-sectoral work on the municipal level, entailing a new challenge for the municipalities and the rescue service.

The studies presented in this article focuses on studying the discussions of politicians and staff groups in order to understand how a new law is perceived and acquires significance over time. The first study was carried out during 2003, and the second between 2009 and 2010.

The result shows that attitudes regarding the ambitions of the upcoming law could be formulated in discourses about the municipality’s safety and protection work. Two main discourses emerged with certain common standpoints, Discourse I and Discourse II. Discourse I was mainly rooted in current reality and critical as regards the coming Act, while Discourse II was more rooted in the ambitions of the upcoming Act.

The development from 2003 to 2010 shows a gradual shift towards a complex and conflict-laden Discourse II and a strengthening of Discourse I. Discourse II, which emanated from the intermediate level, has spread all the way up to the very highest political level, but only partly down to the lowest hierarchical level consisting of foremen and firemen. The results also indicate that a great deal of mutual communication is necessary in order to realise the ideas of the new legislation in practise.

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1. Introduction

The reformed Rescue Service Legislation, the ‘Civil Protection Act Against Accidents’, came into force in Sweden on 1st January, 2004. During the year of 2003, we studied aspects of the introduction of the new law by analysing discussions related to that law by politicians and personnel within the hierarchy of municipalities. Furthermore we have followed how that law is understood, evaluated and in which way the organisation of activities can be envisaged in order for the law to be enacted (Johansson-Hidén, 2006; Johansson-Hidén and Wreder, 2009). Finally, the study examines how the law is understood and valued five years after its implementation, i.e. between 2009 and 2010. Through studying organisational communication in relation to the new law, it was possible to follow the emergence of different discourses. In this work, discourses are seen as summaries of a number of discussions and stances with the same type of content. A discourse is thus

defined when the principal thoughts, stances and values in a multiplicity of conversations and discussions are fundamentally understood as being the same.

This article focuses on existing discourses. The research questions addressed are:

Which discourses on municipal protection and safety work in relation to the law, its introduction and subsequent effects, are to be found in group discussions?

Which discourses are to be found on the role of rescue services in municipal safety and protection work based on the law?

Which groups of politicians or staff represent which discourses?

1.1. Background

The study was brought about by the Swedish Rescue Services Agency’s need to look more closely at the prerequisites for strategic development within municipalities and rescue services, based on the requirements of an impending law; i.e. ‘The Civil

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Protection Act Against Accidents' (Swedish Government Official Reports, 2002:10).

Somewhat essential and very urgent intention was to provide the supportive data for an in-depth discussion about the prerequisites, within the municipalities and the rescue service themselves, prior to the introduction of the new law. Another aim was to follow up on discourses related to the new law after a period of 5 years. The study consists of empirical and descriptive analyses of group discussions among different groups of personnel and politicians regarding strategic planning and prioritization of the rescue service when planning its protection against accidents in the municipalities with a 5–10 years perspective.

1.2. Reformed Rescue Service Legislation

The purpose of the government report presented prior to the bill being passed, Swedish Government Official Reports, 2002:10, concerns modernising earlier legislation and reducing the micro-management of the municipal rescue services. The task also involved having to be more precise in defining the obligations of Government, municipalities and individuals in the society and to clarify the boundaries between the specific legislation of the rescue services and other legislation regulating accident and damage preventive services. By legislating national goals for municipal rescue service operations, the municipalities will provide increased opportunities for the locally-adapted organisation of rescue service operations, in accordance with the principle of municipal autonomy. Previously, micro-management was deemed capable of reducing the flexibility of the organisation, and blocking opportunities for desirable change with regard to the evolution of society.

In the proposed legislation, the following overarching national objectives were formulated (Memo, The Swedish Rescue Services Agency, 2003). The national objectives concerned accident prevention activities as well as rescue service activities:

- Chapter 1, § 1 The operation that will be conducted pursuant to the Act is intended to maintain nationwide, satisfactory and comparable protection from accidents affecting people's lives and health, as well as their property and the environment with respect to local conditions.
- Chapter 1 § 3 The second comprehensive goal is expressed thus; that the rescue services are to be planned and organised in such a way that rescue efforts can commence within an acceptable period of time and be carried out in an efficient manner.

Governmental control is thus brought to bear indirectly by (i) breaking down national goals into municipal organisational goals, which are formulated via action programs for both preventive work and the rescue services. Current rescue service plans will disappear. Accident prevention work is emphasised. To protect people's lives, health, property and environment, the respective municipality is to prevent fires, fire damage and to work for protection from accidents other than those involving fires. This is to be conducted without taking over any responsibility from anyone else. The Act seeks to stimulate (ii) a cross-sectorial as well as a cross-administrative safety effort whereby the respective municipality takes the initiative to co-ordinate the overall work of safeguarding against accidents based on (iii) relevant local risk analyses. The municipal responsibility for rescue efforts, soot removal and fire protection inspections will remain. Accidents in which the rescue services carried out a rescue effort will be investigated. The investigation will look into the reason for the accident, the course of events during the rescue operation and how it was conducted.

The responsibility of the individual is asserted. Both physically and legally, persons have the fundamental responsibility to protect

their lives, their property, and the environment and not to cause damage. Moreover, the individual is liable for the costs of measures needed to fulfill these conditions. Special requirements will apply to owners of buildings with respect to keeping equipment for fire protection, evacuation in the event of a fire and, in some cases, documenting this fire protection preparedness. The responsibility of the municipality will also include maintaining a supervisory function, while individuals will have the 'burden of proof' with regard to their fire protection preparedness being reasonably and satisfactorily organised.

According to the principle of municipal autonomy, it is the duty, as previously mentioned, of individual municipalities to select the organisation and funding that will attain a level of protection and security in compliance with the objectives of the legislation. Prior to the planning of operations within a municipality, the inquiry (Swedish Government Official Reports, 2002:10), preceding the new act, expressed the opinion that risk assessment constitutes a necessary foundation for the planning of both accident and damage prevention operations as well as the rescue services. (iv) Prioritization will probably have to be established and local safety and performance goals formulated. A municipality must improve the safety and security of its residents, workers and visitors.

The Swedish Rescue Services Agency is to have a key supervisory role with regard to municipal operations within the rescue service sector. This supervision will entail: following up and evaluating the results of municipal measures. Follow-up and evaluation are to be carried out with deference to municipal autonomy. Supervision will also entail giving advice and information to the respective municipality and inspiring a positive development process within the rescue service sector.

1.3. Community-based promotion of safety at the municipal level

Protection and safety work within municipalities has been going on for some time within various social sectors in Sweden and is based on different types of problems and risks found in these social sectors. In 1989, however, through a Swedish initiative, an idea – "A Safe Community" – that emphasised a holistic view of how to develop the service, was launched. The "Safe Community"-idea, was later incorporated in a strategy within the global network of the World Health Organisation (WHO) for injury prevention and within the national programme for injury prevention of the Swedish Public Health Institute. The basic idea in "A Safe Community" includes a series of criteria in such a community and has principles on how to put together the work within the structure and organisation existing in the municipality (Cho and Svanström, 2002; Green et al., 2001; Leung et al., 2004; Lindquist et al., 2004; Nielsen et al., 2006; Pain and Townshend, 2001; Rahim, 2005).

The latter principles are thus succinctly formulated.

1. Effective preventive efforts are based upon co-ordination between the various municipal authorities, different social sectors, voluntary organisations, trade and industry, experts and the general public.
2. A democratic attitude and a high degree of participation from all involved parties is a prerequisite.
3. Compilation of data on accidents, injuries, operations, etc., analyses of risks and the identification of affected risk groups.
4. Organisation with project management and cross-sectorially composed project groups for different types of prevention.
5. Injury prevention programmes are to be developed and run on a long-term basis.
6. The work is to be documented and evaluated.
7. The municipality is to participate in the network of municipalities and disseminate knowledge and experience, both nationally and internationally.

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