

FROM BENEFIT CLAIMANT TO ENTREPRENEUR

What signals does society send when 20% of Sweden's ex-prisoners are in receipt of sickness benefit? Does society count ex-prisoners and ex-drug users as a labour resource? In the Vägen Ut! EQUAL partnership, actors from the public sector teamed up with NGOs, especially self-help organisations. They all knew that people who have left prison and drugs behind have a great power and a willingness to change.

The *Vägen Ut!* (Way Out!) partnership sprang from the observation that the crime rate falls noticeably in towns where ex-offenders get together to counsel each other, for instance in the 25 Swedish towns where the CRIS¹ (Criminals Return Into Society) service is active. "In my work as a probation officer, I saw how much energy offenders have, and how it is wasted in an institution," says project manager Pernilla Svebo Lindgren. "The potential became obvious during educational activities in prison, and I wanted to take it a step further by setting up co-operatives in which ex-offenders could work."



Tina Eriksson from Vägen Ut! explains empowerment to Industry and Employment Minister Hans Karlsson at the International Women's Day EQUAL exhibition, Stockholm, 8 March 2004

To set up the project, existing agencies working with ex-offenders in Göteborg were joined by the local co-operative and association development agencies, the employment service, the prison and probation service, the regional social insurance agency, the social work resource centre and the city council. "A venture of this kind relied on mobilising government and municipal resources – not only expert knowledge and legitimacy but also of finance," says Ms Svebo Lindgren. "What's more, brave public servants acted as advocates and ambassadors for the project within their organisations. This has been important both in legitimising the project and in finding public funding." The mix of partners has also been vital, because each of the different public bodies involved

encouraged the others.

SEVEN CO-OPERATIVES AND A CONSORTIUM

During 2003 and 2004, it set up four co-operatives that employ 24 people:

- Villa Solberg – a halfway house for 5-7 male ex-prisoners who work in the greenhouse or workshop or in jobs outside. Residents typically stay 3-6 months
- Karin's Daughters – a craft co-operative run by five women, who carry out weaving, silver-smithing and other handicrafts. The women usually stay for six months.
- Café Solberg – a café and catering business employing three people

¹ www.kris.a.se

- Studio Ateljé Trädet – a women-only craft shop and silkscreen printer's which also runs printing courses

Planning also started for opening a hotel under the transnational Le Mat social franchise brand. These initiatives have been joined, since the end of the EQUAL project, by three further businesses:

- Young Surfers – screen printers for young people
- Anlita – a business employment co-operative
- Villa Karin – a halfway house for women

A further 50 or so people have passed through the co-operatives for social support and/or work training, and many of these have moved on to employment, work experience or education.

The partnership wants to see its methods copied widely. To provide a strong base, it has created a consortium through which the social enterprises can support each other. There are currently seven co-operatives in the consortium, each paying a small membership fee for support with quality, purchasing, finance and personnel administration. "We think social franchising is the way to spread our expertise, especially in two areas – the halfway house and the hotel," says Ms Svebo Lindgren. Through its membership of the *Le Mat* transnational partnership, Vägen Ut! has developed the idea of running franchised hotels staffed by ex-prisoners, and has translated all the manuals from Italian into Swedish. FKU, the Co-operative Development Association, which unites some 30 local agencies across Sweden, will help spread the word, and the plan will be discussed at the *Everybody's Business* conference taking place in Örebro in November 2006 as part of the second-round EQUAL project AGDOR.

At present, the co-operatives' income comes from selling work training places or living places and from running projects. There are also wage subsidies, but these are only granted on an annual basis and vary from year to year, which means the co-operatives face a significant degree of risk, and makes financial planning difficult. This framework applies to any employer of disadvantaged groups, not just to social enterprises. There are no payments in respect of administration costs, such as Samhall, the national integration enterprise, receives. Meanwhile trading income is on an upward trend. As for capital, it has not so far been a problem, as premises have been rented and equipment quite cheap. In future, to permit investment in equipment such as printing presses, approaches might be made to ethical banks such as Ekobanken,¹ an ethical bank open to all who want to encourage possibilities for people to take free initiatives, and JAK Medlemsbank,² a co-operative bank with 30,000 members that charges no interest, but relies solely on a 2½% loan administration charge.

ACADEMIC RESPECTABILITY

Vägen Ut! has created:

- models for how people with substance abuse problems and/or a criminal history can establish themselves on the labour market by starting and running social co-operatives
- forms of co-operation between the social economy and the public sector
- methods of co-operation between the various public sector units that are responsible for granting social allowances to individuals
- changed attitudes in society towards people with drug problems and/or a criminal past

The project partnership has demonstrated ways of exercising influence at individual, organisational and societal levels.

The partnership takes the task of influencing public policy very seriously. It commissioned a research team from Göteborg University to prepare a report on its work, part financed by the Swedish Prison and Probation Service.³ It has received extensive newspaper and magazine coverage, and is also contributing to a seminar for parliamentarians to take place on 27 April

¹ www.ekobanken.se

² www.jak.se

³ *Exit Processes and Empowerment*, Ulla-Carin Hedin, Urban Herlitz and Jari Kuosmanen, Department of Social Work, Göteborg University, 2005, ISBN 91-86796-57-7. See www.kw.se

2006 – which it is hoped that even the Prime Minister will attend. “Through our work in the EQUAL national thematic group *Social enterprises as the path to the labour market*, we have been able to use our real examples, both of successful strategies and of problems, in working with other players on issues including: economic assistance, socio-economic accounting, financing, procurement issues and support structures. The group is chaired by a member of parliament and the project is organised by a body attached to the Ministry of Industry, Employment and Communications, which means that we can reach those who are important when it comes to change,” says Ms Svebo Lindgren.

The cost-benefit evidence in support of social co-operatives is very persuasive. “The Justice Department has already noticed how crime falls in towns where CRIS starts a co-counselling scheme for ex-prisoners,” says Ms Svebo Lindgren. “The statistics show that a male heroin user costs society around €211,000 a year, and a male alcoholic €68,000 (women a little less). Crime – theft, break-ins etc. – is the major cost, and about 48% of these costs fall on the Justice Department. So if we can keep someone off drugs and in work, the payback is immense.”

The research also concludes that social co-operatives provide:



Social entrepreneurs from Vågen Ut! harvest mushrooms

Rehabilitation that works – working in social co-operatives means constructive rehabilitation from substance abuse and crime. For someone who has reached a turning point, daily work in a strong and closely-knit working group provides both security and structure. It also seems to be important not to be the only one in the group with a certain type of addiction, but to have others to identify oneself with.

New skills – production skills – for instance silkscreen printing, weaving mats or making sandwiches – administrative skills – doing the book keeping, planning a budget, submitting the tax declarations –entrepreneurial skills – making your way in society, dealing with officials, speaking to politicians, negotiating for facilities and funds – and social skills – helping each other on a spirit of solidarity and empathy, for instance to give a urine sample or to go to AA meetings.

The report also notes that the co-operatives’ success has depended on the commitment and voluntary effort of their founders.

SUCCESS FACTORS

Vågen Ut!’s key message is one of empowerment – that when people are given the opportunity to influence their own lives together with others, something happens that leads to real rehabilitation and the opportunity to create decent possibilities to work.

This process works by creating good role models, and relies on people from the authorities contributing their knowledge. It also depends on local and regional networks of support structures, such as Kooperativ Konsult, the Gothenburg co-operative development agency, and GFC, the Gothenburg NGO Agency. At national level, various types of resources are needed in order to develop this support, resources that have to be freed from the government, the market and civil society.

- **Horizontal (practice) mainstreaming**

Vägen Ut! has, by its way of working, persuaded the authority representatives in the Development Partnership to change their own role and look at their former clients as equal collaboration partners.

- **Vertical (policy) mainstreaming**

Vägen Ut! has developed a new approach and working method that encourages empowerment, as well as the concept for running a halfway house. These have become models for both client organisations and the prison and probation service in many locations within Sweden. It is very likely that in a few years, through a process of social franchising, similar enterprises will have been established in several places in Sweden.

Vägen Ut! has clearly demonstrated with its active work to find solutions to each individual's need to sustain themselves that the current social and employment insurance system is not suited to either Vägen Ut! target groups or social enterprises, and has highlighted the changes required.

- **Local development**

Within three years Vägen Ut! has started seven new co-operatives with a total of 24 employees. Every new enterprise set up had the interests and abilities of the co-workers as its starting point, combined with business considerations as to whether the enterprise would be profitable. Another 50 people have by way of Vägen Ut! moved on to a life without crime or drugs. The socio-economic gain of around 75 people exiting a life of crime or drug abuse and instead participating in the production of goods and services is enormous. An initiative to demonstrate this with the help of socio-economic accounting is under way. Vägen Ut! continues to act as an incubator for several co-operatives, with the established co-operators serving as role models and guides for new co-operators.

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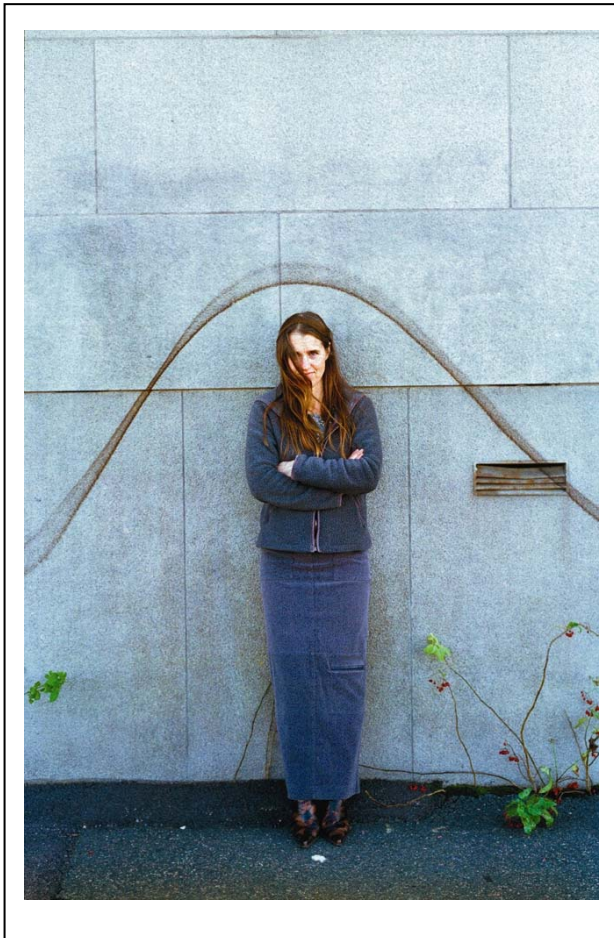
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ANNEX – A TESTIMONY FROM CATHARINA

My name is Catharina and I am going to tell you some of my thoughts on having been convicted and how it affects you as a human being and about the difficulties with finding your place in society.



As a woman, you've not only committed a crime against the laws of Sweden. As a woman and a criminal, you've committed yet another crime, a crime against the role of women. If you're also a mother and a drug abuser you end up a long way down on the social ladder. The fundamental role, the good mother, the honest, caring woman, has been given a bad knock. I have experience of serving a long prison sentence myself, and have found that this permeates the whole probation and prison service; it's been based on the male norm for so many years that women have not even come into the equation.

I reacted when I got to the Hinseberg prison in 1993. There was no visiting apartment then. But they had them in male prisons, such as Hall and Kumla. It sends the message that, as a woman you've forfeited all rights to motherhood. You're not a real woman. There's a visiting apartment available today, but consider that in 1993, Hinseberg had been a prison for women for 30 years.

After years in such a passivity-inducing environment your self-confidence withers away. You've never made any decisions of your own, the food is served, and the doors are opened for you. You're in prison

uniform year in, year out. Then the day comes when you are going to step out onto the street. You are anything but ready to address the obstacles and trials that reality – society – will offer.

You no longer know who you are. A long prison sentence or a long period of drug abuse may perhaps be compared to a long illness: you have to start everything all over again. What sort of food do I like, when do I want to eat, what does the food cost? Society changes and it could be a complete nightmare just to pluck up the courage to go to the bank or queue up in the post office; not knowing how the most basic things work defeats you completely.

The self-confidence isn't exactly great and it will get another blow when you have to get out into the housing market and try to get a roof over your head. The housing company giants can pick and choose their tenants. If you manage to get as far as signing a tenancy agreement and are then faced with a "No, we don't want people on benefit", then that's another proof of how worthless you are. Because nobody dreams as hard as you do.

Should I lie?

You are caught between extremes. Should you lie? "I've been abroad for eight years", fearing the follow-up question: "Which languages do you speak?" "Well, I more or less get by in Swedish!" or the classic "I have worked on an oil rig." The question is whether you should go to the job centre and say "Hello, I have been inside for the last eight to ten years", or "I have 25 years of drug abuse behind me, but apart from that, I'm fine!..." Sadly, the risk of turning around in the doorway becomes far too great. In that phase, the obstacles are too huge.

I believe that there is a lot to learn first. What do you talk about during coffee breaks, what do normal people do after a day's work? The only thing you've heard for years is problems – yours and other people's. It's difficult to keep the balance. It's easy to become disinhibited and burn your boats even before you have had the chance to see whether you can sail at all, or it may feel so risky that you isolate yourself completely from the world, not daring to do anything. Exclusion is a heavy burden to carry.

I therefore wholly and fully believe in the idea of social co-operatives. Intermediate forms are needed where you can meet people from both sides, which offer the training and support you need to move on and change your life.

Karin's Daughters is an arts and crafts co-operative, which brings me to something very close to my heart. It uses creative art as a method. To work with your hands, to express yourself creatively, strengthens self-confidence and heals the soul. All creative work helps you to get through difficulties... The creative method can be seen as a tool, an approach where you work through distressing experiences and find something new.

The pictures and things I made opened up a porthole to another, sounder world. My empty everyday life became meaningful and it led to conversations and meetings that would not have happened otherwise. You should safeguard people's need to create and express themselves. Art is what I have the least time for at the moment. But the longing is there. I would like to make a pitch for it, as it is the salt and water of life.

Finding somewhere to live

During the last nine months of my sentence I looked for somewhere to live in Göteborg. Owing to my long imprisonment and absence from society I soon discovered that I didn't stand a chance in the open market. If I succeeded in finding something, I wasn't desirable as a tenant. As I previously mentioned, they didn't want someone who was receiving social benefits.

It's not exactly as if you can pick and choose your jobs, after a number of years in prison, is it? In the Reference Apartment Unit in Skyddsvärnet (The Shelter), where I stayed according to paragraph 34,¹ I could have had some help to find an apartment. But my social services office at that time believed that I was not in need of any help. So, I had no support and at the same time I couldn't apply on the open housing market. I fell between two stools.

It was a very stressful time. If there had been some communication between the different authorities I wouldn't have ended up in that quagmire. All the energy I put into finding a roof over my head I could instead have put into working out how to find work and support myself. I believe that authorities should collaborate. It would mean better outcomes and save people from suffering and unnecessary nervous strain.

Not everybody who has had the attention of the prison and probation service, or has abused drugs, is cast in the same mould. What I mean is, if you've been to prison it doesn't make you a drug addict, or if you've been struggling with drug abuse, it doesn't have to mean that you've been deprived, or not had an education.

But I would like to point out that our basic human needs are the same, that we are more alike than different. This is why it's important to support projects that promote cross-border ideas and beliefs that there is no "them", there is only "us". If there is co-operation and the courage to see people's potential and knowledge, I am convinced that together we can create ways in which previously convicted individuals or drug abusers can take power over their own lives. They will be able to grow through the experiences they've had and become accepted as worthy citizens.

Without Vägen Ut! we would also have been without Karin's Daughters – and that would have been a shame. Because without this co-operative my sisters and I would probably not have been the strong and hopeful women that we are today! We are women who have taken power over our lives and we are able to support others who would like to do the same.

¹ §34 of the Swedish Act on Correctional Treatment in Institutions (1974:203) provides that part of a prison sentence can be served outside an institution

Into full-time work

On 1st August 2004, I gave up my sickness benefit and started working full-time at Karin's Daughters. That I would work with the finances and figures could not have been further from my mind. I would never even have dared to think the thought. The finances of Karin's Daughters are my main responsibility today.

It's not been easy to get into this. I've woken up many times quite breathless and with a pounding heart! How will I cope, what have I got myself into? I realise that I wouldn't have been able to handle or cope with a normal job. When your self-confidence is wavering and the responsibility seems too large, my colleagues are there to support me and cheer me on. In our social co-operative we look after each other. There is a special tolerance here and we have all been in the same boat. When someone is weak the other is strong. To cope with a job has not been something obvious for most of us. There has been a long and necessary process to find the courage to go the whole way and actually trust yourself.

It's always good to study and study some subjects deeper, but you can't find everything in a book, which is why it's right to make use of your own experiences. As a person I can feel empathy and I can understand and be there for someone to a certain degree. But if I've never been there, I can never fully know or understand what the other person is going through. That is why we at Karin's Daughters believe that we are, because of our different experiences, credible and good at what we are doing.

It is probably not as threatening if someone from Karin's Daughters, who has had or has her own children placed in a foster home, says: "Maybe you have to shape up! Find your own strength before you start thinking about getting your children back home." It can be harder to hear the same thing from a social welfare officer. The social was once involved in taking the children into care and many mums have stood there alone with their distress and guilt. I believe that such strong and painful feelings understandably tend to lay a fog over your common sense.

We want to and can support women. It is possible to be a mum in more than one way. Maybe the option of taking the children home isn't the best one. Maybe it would be better for the child not to leave the foster home at all, but you can still be an important and attentive mum even if you don't live together. There are living proofs amongst us at Karin's Daughters that this works.

Parenting course

Here at Karin's Daughters we make sure that there is a close co-operation between ourselves, the person on work training, and her social welfare officer. I want to underline that the professionals are important in these contexts. I believe in the combination of professionalism and one's own experiences. This conviction is confirmed by the parenting course, which takes place twice a year at Gruvberget.

Gruvberget is a residential study centre within the Prison and Probation Service where inmates can apply to take various courses. Long-term prisoners are also able to come here for a winter or summer stay.

The self-help organisation RiksBryggan (The Bridge) organises the course. Personally I work with the children. My old children's nurse training comes into favour again. My own experience of prison and of monitoring children close to me, with one parent in prison for many years, has been invaluable. If nothing else I can convey hope and show that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

I have visited Gruvberget many times from the inside of the Prison and Probation Service. Now, I come from the outside in, to the institution. The group that travels to Gruvberget to work consists of qualified social workers, ex-criminals, prison officers, ex-drug addicts and child pedagogues. We are an excellent team. Everything is possible; the differences are not so great.

I would like to end with an urgent request. Have the courage to see an individual's potential, allow it and make use of it. Social co-operatives are quite simply a good working method and collaboration is a necessity.

Empowerment – the one who owns the problem carries the solutions