Organizing Refugee Reception: 
The Case of the Swedish Introduction Reform

Gunnar Myrberg  
Department of Government and Institute for Housing and Urban Research,  
Uppsala University, Sweden  
E-mail: gunnar.myrberg@ibf.uu.se

Abstract  
There is a complex and dynamic relationship between the definition of immigration policy and the way organizational questions within the policy field are resolved. The field spans several political sectors and is generally characterized by multilevel complexity, a high degree of unpredictability and a number of politically sensitive considerations. As I will argue in this paper, these characteristics are particularly valid in the Swedish case due to its popularity as a destination country for refugees, its relatively generous asylum policies and its unique settlement policies.

Swedish local government introduction for refugees started in 1985. The shared, and blurred, responsibility between central and local government agencies within this area has been debated ever since. In December 2010, the recently re-elected Swedish right-wing government launched the so called Introduction Reform (Etableringsreformen), presenting it as “the most important immigration policy reform in Sweden in three decades”. The main difference compared to the earlier system was that the responsibility for all introduction measures during the first two years was transferred from the local government to the central government in the form of the Public Employment Service. Other central government agencies, such as the Migration Board and the County Administrative Boards, were also given new tasks, while the “only” remaining, formal role of the municipalities was to provide housing and language instruction during the introduction phase.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the initiation and implementation of the Introduction Reform with a specific focus on issues of political accountability and coordination in the central-local government relation. What did the government want to achieve with the reform? What kind of problems have surfaced during the implementation of the reform? And how much has actually been changed compared to the previous system?

This paper is prepared for presentation at the ECPR Joint Sessions Conference in Salamanca, Spain, 10-15 April 2014. Workshop: Administrative organization and the welfare state: wicked issues and the challenges of accountability, legitimacy and coordination.
**Introduction**

Immigration policy consists of two interrelated policy fields: immigration control and welfare policy. The external immigration control policy field is about regulating who is allowed to enter the country, while the internal welfare policy field is about providing social rights to the inhabitants of the country. Following Michael Walzer’s (1983:31) famous argument that “the idea of distributive justice presupposes a bounded world within which distribution takes place”, Swedish political scientist Karin Borevi (2012:32; cf. Öberg 1994) has argued that two general options can be discerned concerning who is allowed to enjoy the national welfare policy in Western democracies: Either a system where everyone with legal residence in the country has equal access to the welfare policy but with some kind of limitation concerning who is allowed to immigrate, or a system of free immigration policy but with a differentiated right to welfare for different categories of inhabitants (for example, lower benefit rates for certain groups of immigrants). The latter system resembles the so called “guest-worker-model”, where migrants are expected to return after some time. Varieties of the guest-worker-model have been applied in countries such as Germany and Austria but also in the Scandinavian countries in the early decades of labor migration following World War II. Since the 1970s, however, it is the first system, in different varieties, that has been perceived as the more logic choice for the universal welfare state countries in Northern Europe.

Choosing a universal welfare policy system with limitations of immigration implies a need for organizational solutions both with regard to immigration control and with regard to the introduction and integration of newly arrived immigrants. These solutions vary from country to country and also over time within any specific country. To study these organizational solutions as the policy choices they constitute is interesting from an immigration policy perspective as well as from a more general public administration perspective (Christensen and Lægreid 2008; Reichersdorfer et al. 2013).

Empirically, this paper is focused on recent organizational developments in Swedish welfare policy for newly arrived immigrants. In international rankings of immigration and integration policies, Sweden is regularly placed at the top end of what the Norwegian sociologist Grete Brochmann and social anthropologist Anniken Hagelund (2012:12) has called the continuum of “kindness” (cf. Sainsbury 2012). For example, Sweden holds the top position, just in front of Canada, in the Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX 2011). And in the Civic

---

1 It may be argued that the concept of “circular migration” promoted by, among others, the European Commission actually represents a third option combining limitations of immigration with differentiated social rights, i.e. a worst-case scenario from a migrant perspective (Hansen 2014).
Integration Index, constructed by the American political scientist Sara Wallace Goodman (2010:764), Swedish legislation is portrayed as representative of an “enabling” strategy as opposed to the “prohibitive” strategies of countries like Denmark and the Netherlands. On the other hand, Sweden is generally placed rather low in various integration policy output rankings based on indicators such as employment, education, housing segregation and criminality (Koopmans 2010; OECD 2010). Perhaps not surprisingly, the latter kind of rankings receive much more publicity in Swedish media, thus putting pressure on the politicians to do something about the alleged “failure of Swedish integration policy” (cf. Integration Board 2007).

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to analyze the initiation and implementation of the Swedish Introduction Reform (Etableringsreformen), which was launched by the then recently re-elected right-wing government in December 2010. The reform is played out within the welfare policy field but it has also served to strengthen the organizational link between the spheres of immigration control and integration measures. The analysis will have a specific focus on issues of political accountability and coordination in the central-local government relation and it will be centered on the following three questions: What did the government want to achieve with the reform? What kind of problems have surfaced during the implementation of the reform? And how much has actually been changed compared to the previous system?

The paper is structured as follows: In the first section, I will present three theoretical perspectives – instrumental, negotiation and cultural-institutional – on the organization of immigration policy suggested by Norwegian political scientists Tom Christensen and Per Lægreid (2008). Then I will try to elaborate the latter two perspectives somewhat by drawing on the work of two Swedish political scientists, Marie Bengtsson (2002) and Martin Qvist (2012). The second section gives an overview of Swedish immigration policy reforms from 1985 to 2010 and thus paving the way for the third and fourth sections in which I will present and analyze the initiation and implementation of the Introduction reform. Finally, I will discuss the main findings of the paper and provide some concluding remarks.

**Theoretical perspectives on the organization of immigration policy**

*Instrumental, negotiation and cultural-institutional perspectives*

In a study of Norwegian reforms in the field of immigration policy and administration, Christensen and Lægreid (2008:161) argue that this policy field has four particularly important characteristics: First, it is unusually complex and politically sensitive since it covers
the laws and rules of entry as well as governmental efforts to integrate immigrants once they
have been admitted. Second, it is inherently unpredictable and thus requires robustness as well
as flexibility in the administrative system aside from the obvious demands in terms of
financial and organizational resources. Third, the field spans several policy sectors, such as
housing, education, employment, health, crime and social affairs. Finally, it involves a high
degree of multilevel complexity, since it is conducted simultaneously at several different
levels – the international, the European, the national, the regional and the local – with varying
degrees of public scrutiny from one to another.

Taken together, these characteristics create a complex and dynamic relationship between the
definition of immigration policy, its formal organization and its implications. To encompass
the complexity of this policy area, Christensen and Lægreid (2008:164) propose a theoretical
approach based on three different perspectives: instrumental, negotiation and cultural-
institutional.

The instrumental perspective is based on the idea that the political leadership tries to use its
hierarchical power both to dominate the decision-making process and to design the
administrative apparatus so as to fulfill major political goals (March and Olsen 1983). Key
assumptions underlying this perspective are that the political leadership manages to control
the reform process and that it engages itself in organizational thinking. In particular, political
leaders facing questions of organizational design must attend both to the vertical – i.e. the
allocation of authority in the organization across hierarchical levels – and to the horizontal
dimensions of specialization – i.e. the way functions or tasks are divided on the same level
among ministries, agencies and public organizations.

In practice, however, the political leadership may be subjected to a number of different
constraints that modify the assumed instrumental-hierarchical preconditions. For example,
ttempts to redesign an administrative apparatus often becomes subject to negotiations
between the political executive and subordinate administrative bodies or interest groups. As
highlighted by the negotiation perspective, negotiations may lead to compromises and
unforeseen modifications in policy content and organizational solutions, but they may also
increase the legitimacy of decisions, provided that the actors involved approve of the
negotiation process.

Finally, the cultural-institutional perspective emphasizes the importance of informal norms
and values (March and Olsen 1989). The idea here is that public organizations tend to develop
gradually and, in the process, become characterized by certain distinctive cultural features.
When reforms occur, they are likely to be implemented relatively quickly if they are
perceived to be compatible with traditions, while a lack of compatibility may lead to obstruction, modification or adaptation of the reform (Brunsson and Olsen 1993).

Considering the high political saliency of the immigration policy area, Christensen and Lægreid (2008:164f) assume that political executives will allocate attention as well as resources to the field. However, they see it as an open question to what extent the political leadership actually manages to exert control over immigration policy and administration reforms. One argument, based on the instrumental perspective, would be that centralized organizational solutions are best for politically salient policy areas in order to secure political control, coordination and consistency. On the other hand, centralization may also create a situation in which the political leadership becomes too involved in potentially politically damaging individual cases (cf. Reichersdorfer et al. 2013). Thus, the opposite view is that political executives should decentralize and let managers manage in politically sensitive policy areas, while executives should stick to developing the main guidelines, frames or strategies. This well-known general instrumental strategy of blame-avoiding has been described in many studies of public reforms on sensitive topics (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004; Hood 2002; Christensen and Lægreid 2007), including the areas of immigration policy (Guiraudon and Lahav 2000).

The main empirical conclusion of Christensen and Lægreid’s study is that the story of Norwegian immigration administration reform is a story about how political executives, irrespective of ideology, struggle to find a balance between political control and agency autonomy. This is of course a general challenge in any political administrative system, but the characteristics of the immigration policy field seem to make the challenge particularly demanding.

Political leaders experience more pressure for change than in most other fields, a pressure that is constantly changing, as are the political strategies to cope with this pressure, creating challenges to consistency. They also feel the effects of the ‘double bind’ – when political executives try to use structural devolution to increase the autonomy of the immigration agencies, they get criticized for being passive, yet when they install intervention mechanisms or take direct action, they are accused of undermining the autonomous system they have established (Christensen and Lægreid 2008:175).
Elaborating the negotiation perspective

In her analysis of Swedish immigration policy reforms during the 1980s and 1990s, Swedish political scientist Marie Bengtsson (2002) argues that the entire policy area of immigration policy, and particularly the field of refugee reception, rests on an interdependence relation between the central government and its various branches on the one hand, and the local government, i.e. the municipalities, on the other. At the core of her argument is the simple, but important, observation that it is the central government that grants newcomers permission to stay in the country, while it is the local government that provides the actual housing, education, health care and so on.

According to Bengtsson, the relationship between the levels of central and local government has traditionally been described either in terms of steering – i.e. that local governments are simply executing centrally determined policies – or in terms of strong local self-government – i.e. that local governments, not least in the Scandinavian countries, has a constitutionally protected right to handle their own affairs within certain legal limits. In Bengtsson’s view, both these perspectives take a hierarchical point of departure which make them unnecessarily static and thus ill-equipped to discover and, eventually, to explain changes in the relation between the two levels of government.

To overcome these problems, Bengtsson develops an interdependence perspective on the central-local government relation, with primary regard to refugee reception, drawing on literature in the international relations tradition. While she admits that there is an important difference between international political actors – normally states and other judicially autonomous units – and local governments, which get their authority from the central government through legislation; she argues that formal hierarchy, such as the one separating central from local government, may sometimes hide rather than reveal the real power balance between actors.

To view the relationship between central and local government in terms of interdependence leads to a focus on the resources that actors possess. According to Bengtsson (2002:ch.3), the most relevant resources for public organizations are: authority-related resources, financial resources, political resources, informational resources, and organizational resources. Generally, the central government has a power advantage concerning authority, financial and political resources, while local governments have an advantage when it comes to informational and organizational resources. Obviously, the central government usually has superior resources in total, but it may still be dependent on local governments since neither actor possesses all the resources it needs. Thus, Bengtsson argues that central and local
government actors should be seen as complementary in terms of policy making and implementation. She also points out that, historically, negotiation between the responsible government ministry and the collective actor Swedish Association of Local Authorities, representing the local governments, have been a common way of handling the immigration policy area in Sweden. In fact, she argues that the outcomes of these negotiations basically reflect an on-going power balance variation between the two actors.

According to Bengtsson, the authority resource, which normally is the fundamental resource of the central government, has traditionally been very limited in the field of Swedish integration policy. Her explanation of the absence of strict legislation regulating the relationship between the central and the local government is that the central government has not dared to take the risk of forcing local governments into taking part in the integration policy, by fear for the effects this would have on public opinion, both towards the central government and towards the refugees. Instead, the central government has tried to encourage local governments to increase their refugee reception through the means of agreements and, to some extent, economic incentives.

For the local government, on the other hand, authority-related and financial resources have been lacking. Local governments have had limited possibilities to control the number of refugees moving into their area after receiving asylum, and local government costs for taking care of newcomers have never been covered fully by the central government. However, the local governments have always had the upper hand with regard to the organizational resource. It is, again, the local governments that respond to the needs of newcomers in terms of housing, education, health care and so on, which are the goods that the central government simply cannot provide directly.

Elaborating the institutional perspective

While Bengtsson criticizes the hierarchical description of the relation between the central and local government for being too static, and for not taking sufficient notice of the agents’ respective power resources, she does not question the assumption, underlying both the instrumental and the negotiation perspectives, of the central and local government forming two separate and easily distinguishable entities. In contrast, Swedish political scientist Martin Qvist (2012), in his analysis of the governing of local introduction programs for newcomers in Sweden, finds himself grappling with the impression that the map, in terms of a clear distinction between central and local government agencies, just don’t fit with his empirical observations. Rather than acting separately, he notices, central as well as local government
agencies are constantly engaged in various networks based on sharing of information, imitation and learning.

In Qvist’s interpretation (2012:ch.4), there is a long tradition of governing through ‘soft’ policy measures in the area of refugee reception and introduction programs in Sweden. As an example, he refers to the system of negotiation based on agreements between the central government and the municipalities in the mid-1980s, and he argues that this system has provided a framework for governing central-local relations and served as an institution for diplomacy, thus avoiding open conflict in the policy field of refugee reception for a long period of time. This system prescribes certain roles and norms of appropriate behavior: the municipalities act in accordance with a norm of solidarity, or responsibility-sharing, while the government agency responsible for the negotiations complies with a norm of reciprocity, approaching the local representatives in a diplomatic and non-coercive manner.

Qvist argues that these norms and strategies, developed over time, has served as a basis for the governance of local integration programs, partly because other regulatory and financial means have not been available for the government agencies in this policy area. In 2001, (i.e. at the point in time when Bengtsson concluded her study) the Swedish Integration Board (Integrationsverket) initiated a strategy for collaboration and improved coordination of integration programs. This strategy was based on agreements on policy coordination between actors at different administrative levels and on developing the organization and content of the program. At central level a policy network of government agencies issued broad guidelines for the program and for the collaboration at regional and local levels.

Considering that the creation of collaborations was voluntary and not attached to any economic benefits, Qvist denotes the strategy as successful insofar as it resulted in a widespread adoption of regional and local agreements around the country. This created, in a formal sense, significant conformity with the idea of a differentiated and coordinated program, based on the general political employment strategy. It did not, however, lead to corresponding changes in the organization and structure of the program.

For the organizations involved at the local level (mainly the municipal integration offices and the local branches of the public employment services) the formal conformity through the agreements was a way of enhancing legitimacy for the local programs. The organizational responses at the local level involved, to a varying degree, decoupling of the collaborative activities from the more practical structures and procedures of service provision. In some of the cases there were instances of more concrete initiatives but these were quite limited in scope and often project based.
Qvist (2012: ch.8) argues that while governance provided local actors with significant discretion, it failed to provide more detailed guidance on how the individualized and tailor-made services should be realized in practice. Furthermore, the general guidelines were a product of compromise with unresolved conflicts and contradictions for the local actors to handle. As a consequence, the local integration offices sought guidance on more practical issues within an alternative collaborative structure, consisting of practitioners from similar organizations and with similar professional orientation. These professional networks brought together organizations from the whole region and sometimes from all over the country. Professional norms and symbols were diffused through these networks. Thus, the development of the program did not primarily occur among the actors in the formal strategy for collaboration. Instead, these activities took place in what Qvist describes as an organizational field of local refugee reception.

Qvist’s findings provide important insights on the impact of governance processes at the local level and on a different type of collaborative processes than those usually associated with this form of governing. Research on governance often emphasizes collaboration between interdependent actors engaged in joint problem solving through resource coordination. This is also the basic idea behind collaboration and partnership as a means for developing differentiated employment programs for newcomers. Governance and decentralized decision making may, however, result in an increased importance of alternative sources of guidance, such as professional networks, and Qvist argues that his study is a prime example of collaboration in professional networks leading to processes of increased homogenization.

Summary of the theoretical perspectives

Christensen and Lægreid propose a theoretical approach to the study of change and continuity in the field of immigration policy and administration based on three perspectives: instrumental, negotiation and cultural-institutional. In their own study of Norwegian immigration administration reforms, they find evidence supporting all three perspectives although with an emphasis on the instrumental perspective and its hierarchical understanding of the central-local government relation.

Bengtsson, on the other hand, argues strongly in favor of the negotiation perspective based on the understanding of central and local government as actors with complementary resources and power bases. According to Bengtsson, immigration policy and administration, particularly in terms of refugee reception, constitute a field in which there is a constant interdependence between the different levels of government. The more precise nature of this interdependence
hinges on factors such as the “pressure” on the system, in terms of the number of refugees, housing issues, economic situation and so on. Perhaps a bit counter-intuitively, Bengtsson argues that the bargaining position of the local governments is strong when a lot of refugees are coming to the country, and particularly if this is combined, as it was in Sweden in the beginning of the 1990s, with a general economic crisis. In more tranquil times, the bargaining position of the local governments becomes weaker.

Finally, Qvist questions the description of central and local governments as separate actors. In practice, he argues, the administration of immigration affairs is an on-going process in which various agencies cooperate and intermingle in networks, thus developing shared norms and expectations of appropriateness. As a consequence, reforms in terms of what level of government carries what responsibility may sometimes look rather drastic on the surface, while business as usual may be a more accurate description of what is actually going on at the level of implementation.

**Overview of Swedish immigration policy reforms from 1985 to 2010**

Sweden has been a country of net immigration throughout the post-WWII period. From the beginning of the 1950s to the beginning of the 1970s labor immigration dominated, which meant that immigration control mainly served to regulate immigration in such a way that everyone had a job to go to. As pointed out by Borevi (2012:33), this made it easy to justify a policy where workers who had immigrated also had equal access to universal welfare policy systems. In fact, Borevi argues that this was a period of “non-policy” in the sense that the previously described tension between immigration control and welfare policy just didn’t surface politically. The situation changed in the mid-1970s, however, when the nature of immigration went from being dominated by labor migrants to a domination of refugees and family migrants. As it turned out, the previous harmony between immigration control and integration did not apply to this new type of immigration. Suddenly, the government had to consider not only internal labor market relations but also human rights principles and international conventions. According to Borevi, this also led to a shift in the way the government sought to gain public support for its immigration policy. From the 1970s onward, it became important to make sure that refugees and family members who were granted entrance to the country had a justified need of protection, that they could be labeled “real refugees”.

Another consequence of the changed character of immigration – from labor migrants to refugees – was a general perception that society needed to supply some kind of specific
support measures during the newcomers’ first years in Sweden. Thus, the first Swedish system for the introduction of newcomers was initiated in the mid-1980s. The practical responsibility for the reception of refugees was formally placed with the municipalities (Prop. 1983/84:124). Within the central government administration, the responsibility for immigration affairs was passed on from the Labor Market Board (Arbetsmarknadsstyrelsen) to the Immigration Board (Statens invandrarverk). The Immigration Board was assigned to reach agreements with municipalities about the reception of asylum-seekers and refugees. Municipalities that received these two categories of newcomers became entitled to state refunding for economic aid to the newcomers and they also received additional standardized economic compensation for each received newcomer.

An important characteristic of the refugee reception in the 1980s was the relative absence of a labor market perspective in the activities that newly arrived refugees encountered in the municipalities. Refugee reception was primarily treated as a social policy issue and administrated in a social services spirit (Borevi 2012:52f). An account of refugee work in a major municipality during the second half of the 1980s, made by Swedish political scientist Maritta Soininen (cited in Borevi 2012:53), illustrates this “caring” approach:

Refugee reception policy was characterized by a basic care ideology: the refugees were seen as individuals ‘in chaos’ who, by going through the phases ‘introduction’, ‘attachment’ and ‘weaning’ during a process lasting over a year, were to be transformed into functioning individuals and citizens. According to the programme, the responsibility for this ‘evolutionary process’ rested with the social worker. Crisis treatment made possible by the almost therapeutic relation between the social worker and the refugee was thought to be the means to achieve this. One reason for not judging this interpretation as exaggerated is the fact that the refugee had to be ‘weaned’ from his or her relation to the social worker and ‘prepared for separation’ from this person.

The system was partly reformed in 1991 when the government launched a new model for economic compensation to the municipalities (Prop. 1989/90:105; Förordning 1990:927). Instead of separating the standardized compensation and the refunding for actual costs, the new model implied a standardized compensation for each received newcomer that should also cover the actual costs. The motivation for this reform was to increase the economic incentives for municipalities to enforce effective introduction measures for the newcomers. It was also argued that this system would create more freedom for the municipalities to design, in
cooperation with the Public Employment Service, suitable and efficient measures to help the newcomers earn their own living as early as possible. There was also a new demand on the municipalities to make the introduction measures better adapted to the individual newcomer’s needs and resources by creating an individual introduction plan for each newcomer. It was recommended that the introduction plan should include instruction in the Swedish language (Svenska för invandrare), a mapping of educational and vocational experience and of any special needs of the individual in terms of language instruction, information about society, physical rehabilitation and work. Beyond that, the municipalities were free to decide what should be included in the introduction plan and how and when cooperation with other actors should take place.

In 1993, new changes were put in place in order to make the introduction of newcomers more efficient. The new law about economic compensation for introduction measures (Förordning 1992:1068) gave the municipalities more freedom to organize the distribution of economic support to newcomers than before. The law also introduced the requirement that there should be an individual introduction plan with a time limit for the introduction period. The idea behind this requirement was that an economic compensation for introduction measures during a defined period of time would be easier to understand for the newcomer. The plan should also stipulate clearly what was demanded from the newcomer in terms of activity in different kinds of educational and vocational trainings during this period. Thus, the primarily rights-based system of introductory programs offered free of charge was complemented with a duty-based system, in the sense that people who refused to take part in the programs risked certain economic penalties. It should be noted, however, that in contrast to many other European countries, Sweden has never used any non-monetary penalties, such as tying residence permit or citizenship acquisition to the individual’s participation in integration programs or to success in integration tests (Borevi 2012:84).

Another reform conducted at this point, which turned out to be much more consequential than expected, was the decision to allow asylum-seekers to live with friends or relatives (rather than on refugee-centers), while their applications for permission to stay in the country were being tried (the so called EBO-legislation, Prop. 1993/94:94). At the time of the reform, the expectation was that about five to ten percent of the asylum-seekers would use this opportunity. However, the real figure has come to fluctuate somewhere between 40 and 60 percent over the past two decades (SOU 2009:19, bilaga 4).

The arguments that led up to the 1994 reform on asylum-seekers’ accommodation involved a rather harsh critique of refugee reception in the 1980s. The policy was said to have been
permeated by an unhealthy paternalistic attitude, which tended to result in clientelisation and welfare dependency. It was argued that the authorities should back away and that their role should be to encourage asylum-seekers to help themselves and to take responsibility for their own lives. The 1994 reform caused a political debate about the national settlement policy that has continued well into the 2000s. Local politicians in so called immigrant-dense municipalities have demanded that the state should direct new arrivals to municipalities where the chances for labor market integration are good, even if that implies a certain degree of coercion in relation to the individual. National politicians, on the other hand, have typically opposed the demands for increased government control, stressing the two principles of individual freedom of choice and municipal autonomy. Importantly, the largest political parties in Sweden have been internally divided on the issue of refugee settlement policies. For example, the strongest advocates of increased control have been local Social Democratic politicians in Malmö, Gothenburg and Södertälje. At the national level, however, the Social Democrats have long been stubbornly against all such proposals (Borevi 2012:86f).

The period 1991-1995 must be described as a time of radical change in Sweden. The Swedish economy basically collapsed and at the same time the number of refugees increased rapidly, mainly due to the Balkan wars. In addition, and perhaps partly as a consequence of both the aforementioned factors, refugee policy was a hotly debated topic, often in negative terms. During this period, it turned out that the reforms that had been decided during the end of the 1980s were making the costs of the local governments far from fully refunded. The issue of unclear responsibilities also appeared high on the agenda. All in all, this period became one of conflict, in which negotiations between central and local government were hard, with the local governments often finding themselves in a strong bargaining position vis-à-vis the central government due to the unprecedented external pressures on the immigration administration system. Among other things, this resulted in the central government giving local governments extra grants for increasing the number of refugees received.

In 1996, the parliamentary Committee on immigration policy (Invandrarpolitiska kommittén) observed that only a small share of those newcomers who had completed the introduction period was employed, or in other ways self-sufficient, three and a half years after registration in Sweden. The committee argued that the cooperation between the municipalities and the Public Employment Service were not working out very well and it recommended a more explicit labor market perspective throughout the introduction period including elements of job practice as part of language training (SOU 1996:55). These recommendations were included in a government bill with the subtitle “From immigrant policy to integration policy”
Instructions on what measures should be included in the introduction programs in order for the municipalities to receive state refunding were also spelled out in obligation by law. It was made clear that the aim of the introduction programs should be to provide newcomers with the preconditions to become economically self-sufficient and active participants in society. A new state agency, the Integration Board (Integrationsverket), was assigned to help the municipalities implement introduction programs and to keep track of how the introduction process for newcomers developed.

In the end of the 1990s, refugee immigration started to decrease while the economy was slowly recovering. As a result, the central government started to find room for manoeuvre. The fact that asylum-seekers were now allowed to stay in the local community while waiting for their permits, instead of being automatically allocated to a specific place of residence during the asylum process, meant that the number of refugees covered by negotiated agreements with the municipalities started to decrease. This was actually an unanticipated side effect of the EBO-legislation, but it clearly changed the relative bargaining positions of the two levels of government (Bengtsson 2002:ch.7; Borevi 2012:66f). The local governments were dissatisfied both with the financial conditions and with the reluctance of the central government to impinge on the right of refugees to choose freely where to live. Now, however, negotiations were scarcer and local governments suddenly found themselves in a much weaker position vis-à-vis the central government than in the previous period. The system for reception and introduction of newcomers became subject of yet another government inquiry in 2001, but the inquiry report that was handed over to the government in September 2003 (2003:75) did not result in any new proposals from the government at the time.

After twelve years of Social Democratic minority rule, a right-wing coalition, led by Fredrik Reinfeldt from the Conservative Party, won the election in 2006. One of the new government’s first decisions was to close down the Integration Board and move its areas of responsibility to other government agencies. Most of the responsibility pertaining to reception and introduction of newcomers was moved to the Migration Board (Migrationsverket), but certain parts, such as working with the municipalities to ensure good measures of introduction for newcomers were moved to the County Administrative Boards (Länsstyrelserna), which generally function as the regional branch of the central government administration. Importantly, the main responsibility for the reception and introduction of newcomers continued to lie on the municipalities during the coalition’s first four years in power.

Figure 1 and 2 about here.
The initiation of the Introduction Reform

In December 2010, the recently re-elected right-wing government launched a reform called ‘Labor market introduction of newly arrived immigrants – individual responsibility with professional support’ or, more popularly, the ‘Introduction reform’. The newly appointed Minister for integration, Erik Ullenhag (Liberal Party) presented the reform as the greatest change in Swedish integration policy in decades and showed, from the start, that this reform was a high-profile project for the government (Expressen 2010-12-01).

The main argument underlying the reform was that the introduction of newly arrived immigrants was not working well enough. Repeated labor market evaluations had shown that only 15 percent of men had a job one year after being granted a residence permit, 35 percent after three years and 50 percent after five years. For women, the corresponding figures were 5, 20 and 30 percent respectively. According to the government, these figures indicated severe structural problems with the introduction activities (Prop. 2009/10:60:25).

One of the problems that the government pointed out was that the introduction of newly arrived immigrants had been designed differently in different parts of the country. The municipalities were making their own decisions on whether to pay introduction benefits or financial support (social allowance) to newcomers taking part in the introduction programs. The municipalities also decided on the size of the benefit. Taken together, a picture of widely differentiated implementation of the introduction measures throughout the country thus emerged.

The chief reform measure to come to terms with this differentiation was to move the coordination responsibilities for introduction activities from the municipalities to the central government in the form of the Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen). According to the government, this move would not only make introduction measures less differentiated; it would also, and perhaps even more importantly, underline the so called work-first principle (Prop. 2009/10:60:34f). A new introduction benefit was created, the same amount regardless of where the newcomer would settle down, and paid on the condition that the newcomer would actively participate in introduction activities. The new benefit was also explicitly designed to increase the potential for gender equality by making the individual benefit unaffected by the incomes of other household members.

Another important element of the reform was that the Public Employment Service became responsible for deciding how many newly arrived immigrants the different counties – i.e. the regional level – should receive. These decisions were to be made in consultation with the County Administrative Boards (Länsstyrelserna) and, strengthening the link between the
spheres of immigration control and welfare policy, with the Swedish Migration Board (Migrationsverket), but not, significantly enough, directly with the municipalities. Instead, it became the responsibility of each County Administrative Board to reach agreements with the county’s municipalities based on the decisions made by the Public Employment Service (Prop. 2009/10:60:130ff).

The idea behind this part of the reform was to make conditions on the labor market the principle starting point for the distribution of newcomers among the counties and also in the agreements between the counties and the municipalities. The explicit aim was to improve the chances of matching the newcomer’s skills with a suitable municipality to settle in. However, the government did not want to abolish the right for newcomers to make their own housing arrangements, which, in practice, made the quotas decided in the consultations between the Public Employment Service and the County Administrative Boards quite imaginary. To somehow make up for this problem, the reform entailed an option for newcomers who had made their own housing arrangement to receive assistance to move to another municipality with better labor and market conditions within six months from being granted a residence permit (Prop. 2009/10:60:130ff).

The responsibility for drawing up an introduction plan together with the newcomer was also, quite logically, moved from the municipalities to the Public Employment Service. The plan should be drawn up within two months of arrival in Sweden or in the first contact with the Public Employment Service. The introduction plan is to be designed based on the mapping of the newcomer’s educational and vocational background and it should also take into account health issues and family situation. The maximum length of the introduction period is 24 months and the general rule is that the activities covered by the plan should correspond to a full-time program and include, at a minimum, Swedish for immigrants, civic orientation and employment preparation activities (Prop. 2009/10:60:61f).

The new centralized and standardized introduction benefit means that the municipalities no longer have to pay introduction benefits. To ensure that the need for additional social welfare allowance, paid by the municipalities, would not arise, newcomers with children living at home became entitled to an additional introduction benefit. Likewise, single people without children living at home could become entitled to a special housing allowance. Decisions concerning these additional benefits are made by yet another authority, the Social Insurance Agency (Försäkringskassan) (Prop. 2009/10:60:114).

A completely new element of the reform is the introduction guide. The guide is an independent actor working on commission for the Public Employment Service to support
newcomers in their search for work. The role of the guide is to be supportive and proactive during the entire introduction period. Companies and organisations may apply to become guides and all applicants meeting the requirements of the contract documents are approved. It is the newcomer that chooses the guide and renumeration for the guides is both performance- and results-based. The idea is thus to create a financial incentive for the guides to help the newcomers become able to support themselves as soon as possible. In practice, a starting renumeration is paid when the guide is chosen and begins the assignment and then the guide receives a monthly payment throughout the introduction period. A results-based renumeration applies if the newcomer finds work or studies at post-secondary level during the introduction period. The guide receives more money if the newcomer finds work than if he or she starts to study (Prop. 2009/10:60:74ff).

The remaining municipal responsibilities after the reform include offering language tuition – Swedish for immigrants – and so called civic orientation courses. Housing provision and schooling also continue to be the responsibility of municipalities. The municipalities receive economic compensation from the state in the form of a basic compensation, provided that the municipality has signed an agreement concerning the reception of newcomers. The municipalities also receive a standard allowance for each newcomer intended to cover the costs of reception and practical help in connection with housing, special introductory activities at school, pre-school, out-of-school centres and other education activities. Compensation for certain remaining municipal costs for financial assistance is also included in the standard compensation. In addition, compensation is paid for the costs of financial support to people who, due to certified illness or other physical or mental impairment, are unable to take part in introduction activities on a full-time basis. Special compensation is also provided for unaccompanied minors (Prop. 2009/10:60:135ff).

In summary, the reform has brought about an historic change in the relative distribution of responsibility for newly arrived immigrants between the central government and the municipalities. This change may very well be interpreted as an instrumental move by the government aiming to increase its control over the introduction of newcomers through centralization and standardization.

The reform was not preceded by any outright negotiations between the central government and the municipalities. Interestingly, however, the government’s reform proposal was met with largely positive reactions from the municipalities, particularly the increased role of the Public Employment Service in the very first stage of the introduction period. However, some municipalities, including Malmö, Huddinge and Sollentuna, argued that the municipalities
should remain responsible for the introduction, since they had developed good and efficient procedures and since they were much closer to the individual newcomers and had a more holistic perspective on the introduction phase than the Public Employment Service (Prop. 2009/10:60:47). Bengtsson’s idea about the importance of the difference kinds of resources available to the central and the local government was thus echoed in this critique. Overall, however, the reform proposal did not cause much of a struggle between the two branches of government. One possible explanation for this, following Bengtsson’s interdependence argument, was that the situation in terms of refugee reception was relatively calm when the proposal was presented. The large influx of refugees from Iraq following the war in 2003, and the so called refugee amnesty in 2005, had put the reception system under pressure for some years, but in 2008 and 2009 the number of asylum-seekers was back to relatively normal levels. Thus, the municipalities did not really find themselves in a strong bargaining position vis-à-vis the central government.

In terms of the cultural-institutional interpretation, the reform, as spelled out in the government proposal, clearly distinguishes between the different levels of government and the different state agencies with regard to their respective areas of responsibilities. At the same time, the keywords for the entire reform are coordination and cooperation. Thus, the government shows an awareness that successful introduction measures require close and continuous cooperation horizontally as well as vertically throughout the public administration apparatus. The question is, of course, how the coordination and cooperation work out in practice. A particularly interesting feature of the reform with regard to the cultural-institutional interpretation is the role of the introduction guide, since this is an attempt by the government to create an element of choice, and thus indirectly a kind of market, for the newcomer. One question is of course what kind of choice the newcomers will be able to make in practice and another how the guides will react to the incentives built into the renumeration system.

The implementation of the Introduction Reform

As befits a thoroughly organized society as the Swedish, the Introduction reform has been evaluated and commented on by several different authorities – such as the Swedish National Audit Office (Riksrevisionen), the Swedish Agency for Public Management (Statskontoret), the Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen) and the Migration Board (Migrationsverket) – and by stakeholder organizations – such as the Swedish Association of
Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting) and the Red Cross – right from its inception.

Reading through the pile of evaluations and comments produced so far, three dominant themes emerge. The first theme has to do with the horizontal coordination of responsibilities between the state agencies involved in the introduction process. The main focus is, of course, on the relation between the Migration Board and the Public Employment Service but attention has also been paid to the relation between the Public Employment Service and the County Administrative Boards. The second theme has to do with the vertical coordination of responsibilities between the state agencies on one hand and the municipalities on the other. The third theme lies somewhat outside the nuts and bolts of the reform, but is still highly relevant since it deals with the external conditions for the reform’s success in terms of the radical increase of asylum-seekers from 2010 onwards and, partly as a consequence, the increasing numbers of people with residence permits getting stuck in the temporary housing system organized by the Migration Board in want of permanent housing solutions in the municipalities.

In a very early evaluation report, released only one year after the start of the reform, the Agency for Public Management (2011:76f) concluded that all involved agencies showed a high level of ambition in their efforts to implement the reform, but also that different agencies had quite different perceptions of the reform and that the routines for coordination and cooperation between the agencies were far from satisfactory. As an example, the report argued that a lack of communication between the National Tax Agency (Skatteverket), the Migration Board and the Public Employment Service resulted in unnecessarily long registration leads. The report also highlighted the problem of steering in the settlement process, for which the Public Employment Service carried the main coordination responsibility but with unclear possibilities to actually do anything else than to produce quota recommendations to the County Administrative Boards, which then had to be negotiated with the municipalities.

In a follow-up report a year later, the Agency for Public Management (2012:8f) found that the distribution of responsibilities between the different state agencies started to become more lucid also in practice. The report also concluded that the reform had strengthened the work-first-principle throughout the introduction process, although not to the extent that the government had expected. According to the report, the involved agencies still prioritized the social needs of the newly arrived immigrants before the need of labor market training at the start of the introduction process. The report also argued that the economic incentives for early
labor market introduction were too weak to actually speed up the process of getting newcomers into the workforce. Finally, the report concluded that it was difficult for the newcomers to make an independent choice of introduction guides, which, in turn, impeded the development of a functioning market for guiding companies.

The National Audit Office also published an evaluation report in 2012. The main conclusion in this report with regard to the horizontal coordination of responsibilities was that the reform required a high level of flexibility and cooperation in the relation between the Migration Board and the Public Employment Service and that the success of the reform had become highly contingent on precisely this relation (National Audit Office 2012:3ff). The report showed that the Migration Board routinely mapped the educational and vocational background of the newcomers at an early stage of the asylum process. However, this information rarely reached the Public Employment Service in time. The report also showed that the Migration Board was having difficulties offering all newcomers equal information and support irrespective of factors such as language, place of settlement, background and so on. This was perceived as a particularly important problem, since one of the main objectives with the reform was to get away from the perceived differentiation of the former municipal-run introduction process.

The second theme, i.e. the vertical coordination of responsibilities, occurs both in the above-mentioned evaluation reports and, not surprisingly, in reports and recommendation briefs issued by the stakeholder organization Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions and by the Red Cross. Some common observations can be noted in these reports. The first observation, which the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions had pointed out as a problem well before the reform was launched (Prop. 2009/10:60:109), was that the performance-based character of the new introduction benefits system led to an initial gap in the payment of economic allowances to the newcomers. In the original proposal, the government acknowledged this potential problem but argued that it wouldn’t become particularly consequential in practice (Prop. 2009/10:60:109). According to the evaluation reports, however, this argument turned out to be wrong, which meant that the municipalities unexpectedly had to pay social allowance to the newcomers until the first introduction benefit was disbursed. In addition to this problem, the municipalities also argued that the economic compensation to the municipalities was too low and did not cover the real costs of the municipalities, even considering that the state had taken over the costs for introduction benefits during the 24 months of the introduction period (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions 2013; cf. Agency for Public Management 2012:131f).
The second observation was that many municipalities had interpreted the Introduction reform as an opportunity, or even obligation, to downsize the municipal introduction offices. This seemed quite logical, of course, given the transfer of formal responsibilities for the introduction process from the municipalities to the Public Employment Service. As it soon turned out, however, there was still need for local know-how and local networking, particularly with regard to the issue of housing provision. Formally, housing provision for newly arrived immigrants remained a municipal responsibility also with the Introduction reform, but since the Public Employment Service had taken over the main coordinating responsibility for the settlement of newcomers, there was now considerable confusion between the central government, in the form of the Public Employment Service and to some extent the Migration Board, on one hand, and the municipalities on the other, around the housing issue (Agency for Public Management 2012:111f; Public Employment Service 2013:60f).

The third observation was made by the Red Cross, which, in contrast to the Agency for Public Management, argued that the social needs of the newcomers, both in terms of health care and in terms of a family perspective, had been downplayed, not to say forlorn, in the shift of responsible agency from the municipalities to the Public Employment Service (Swedish Red Cross 2013).

The third theme revolves around the external conditions for the entire refugee reception system. As stated earlier, the Introduction reform was launched in a period that saw decreasing numbers of asylum-seekers but the Syrian refugee crisis that started in 2011, in combination with escalating situations in countries like Afghanistan and Somalia, would soon change everything. While the average number of asylum-seekers in Sweden was 27 000 in the period 2002-2009, the figure had doubled in 2013 (see figure 1). Obviously, this large and rapid increase of asylum-seekers has strained the entire refugee reception system. In addition, a majority of Swedish municipalities struggle with housing shortage, particularly with regard to small and relatively cheap public housing apartments, i.e. precisely the kind of apartments that newly arrived immigrants, and other low-resource categories, are in need of (KUB-projektet 2012, Agency for Public Management 2012). While not really a part of the Introduction reform, the issue of housing provision for newcomers has thus come to dominate much of the debate about refugee reception during the last years, not least since the problem of housing shortage has made it very difficult to uphold the work-first principle throughout the introduction process (Lidén & Nyhlén 2013; Myrberg 2012).
Discussion and concluding remarks

Since early 2011, I have had the opportunity to visit a number of conferences where practitioners from ministries, state agencies and municipalities meet and exchange views about, and experiences from, refugee reception from their respective positions. The overwhelming impression from these conferences is that Qvist’s observation about the role of networking and close cooperation between different branches of government still holds, irrespective of the new roles allocated to the different agencies by the Introduction reform. While there are sometimes quite heated discussions during seminars, particularly between municipal representatives and representatives from the Public Employment Service, much effort is invested from all sides to underline that all agencies are basically working for the same cause, namely to achieve a refugee reception procedure that is as humane and efficient – in that order – as possible.

The most memorable expression of this common aim that I have witnessed came during a conference in Stockholm in December 2011 – i.e. precisely one year after the inception of the reform – with more than 600 practitioners from different parts of the country present. At the very end of the conference, the Minister for integration, Erik Ullenhag, entered the stage and gave a 30 minutes talk that turned the previously quite irritated conference atmosphere into one of enthusiasm and dedication. Instead of a politician speaking to a crowd of civil servants, Ullenhag looked more like a commander in front of his loyal force, which, I now tend to believe, is actually not an entirely false description of the self-image of Swedish immigration policy officers from the top and all the way down.

At the same time, the launch of the Introduction reform can also be seen as an unusually sharp break with the earlier practice of responsibility-sharing between the central government and the municipalities in the field of refugee reception. Much in line with the instrumental perspective, the Swedish government used its hierarchical power both to dominate the decision-making process and to design the administrative apparatus so as to fulfill major political goals. There were complaints from some municipalities when the Introduction reform was proposed, mainly on the ground that the municipalities had developed the necessary know-how to make the introduction process as efficient as possible. Nonetheless, the government decided to shift the main coordinating responsibilities from the municipalities to the Public Employment Service in order to create a more standardized process and in order to underline the work-first principle as the main objective of the introduction process.

Much as could be expected, the actual implementation of the Introduction reform has to a large extent become an exercise of negotiation both horizontally – between different state
agencies with, at least from the start, quite varying views on the distribution of responsibilities – and vertically – mainly between the Public Employment Service and the municipalities but also involving the Migration Board and the County Administrative Boards. Bengtsson’s starting point, i.e. that different levels of government possess different resources, is of course valid and to some extent important in understanding the outcomes of the negotiations in the implementation phase. However, I would like to point out one specific part of the Swedish immigration policy as deviant from Bengtsson’s explanation, namely the ever-important settlement issue. Despite intense critique over two decades, the central government, irrespective of political color, has refused to abolish the so called EBO-legislation which gives asylum-seekers the right to decide on their own in which Swedish municipality they want to settle down. During these two decades, the relative bargaining positions of the central and the local government have changed several times, at least in terms of how these positions are dependent on external pressures such as the state of the economy and the influx of refugees, and yet the central government has staunchly defended this legislation. Thus, not everything in the relation between the state and the municipalities seem to be up for negotiation, changing interdependence relations and power bases notwithstanding.

While issues of coordination and cooperation – horizontally as well as vertically – have been at the forefront of the government’s efforts to reorganize Swedish immigration policy, questions of political accountability have generally played a more low-keyed role. Nonetheless, it is probably fair to say that by implementing the Introduction reform, and particularly by doing it with such pomp and circumstance as has been the case, there has occurred a change in the relative balance of political accountability from the municipalities to the central government. The Minister for integration has ventured a lot of political capital on the success of the reform and he has, accordingly, been chased politically when repeated evaluation reports have shown small, or even non-existent, effects of the reform so far in terms of various measures of integration (Public Employment Service 2013; National Audit Office 2012; Agency for Public Management 2012). Not surprisingly, the Minister has argued that it is far too early to draw any conclusions about the workings of the reform but with the upcoming elections in September 2014, the pressure for results is rising (Ministry of Employment 2013-05-22). Yet, it seems highly unlikely at present that the main features of the reform would be changed even in case of a change in government after the election. The municipalities seem quite happy to be rid of the direct responsibility for the introduction process and the central-local government arguments are now focused very much on the practical problem of finding housing for all those people with permanent residence permits
now waiting in the temporary housing system organized by the Migration Board. Of course, the two levels of government are also discussing what should be the appropriate level of economic compensation for various welfare responsibilities with regard to newcomers but so they did before the reform as well. And while all this is going on, civil servants from state agencies as well municipalities keep networking and struggling along together, as they have done for so long, to make the everyday introduction process for the newcomer as well-functioning as possible.
References

Literature


*Newspaper articles and press releases*

Expressen 2010-12-01. “Integrationspolitik med total kontroll.” Erik Ullenhag, Minister for Integration.


*Governing documents and other official documents*

Government Bills (propositioner)
1983/84:124 Om mottagandet av flyktingar och asylsökande m.m.
1989/90:105 Om samordnat flyktingmottagande och nytt system för ersättning till kommunerna m.m.
1993/94:94 Mottagande av asylsökande m.m.
1997/98:16 Sverige, framtiden och mångfalden från invandrapolitik till integrationspolitik
2009/10:60 Nyanlända invandrade arbetsmarknadstablening – egenansvar med professionellt stöd
Laws (lagar)
1990:927 Förordning om statlig ersättning för flyktingmottagande m.m.
1992:1068 Lag om introduktionsersättning för flyktingar och vissa andra utlännings

Government inquiries (SOU)
SOU 2003:75 Etablering i Sverige: Möjligheter och ansvar för individ och samhälle
SOU 2009:19, bilaga 4 Asylsökandes eget boende, EBO – en kartläggning

Other documents
Figures

Figure 1. Number of asylum-seekers 1984-2013. Source: Swedish Migration Board (www.migrationsverket.se)

![Asylum seekers chart]

Figure 2. Total number of residence permits 1980-2012 distributed over the categories refugees, family migrants and other migrants such as labor migrants, EES-migrants, students and adoptees. Source: Swedish Migration Board (www.migrationsverket.se)

![Residence permits chart]