



Folkbildnings- *studieförbundens* förbundet *intresseorganisation*

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Folkbildning -
a bridge between
people and politicians

the answers and submits them to the municipality or county council/region. The views of the participants are considered by the relevant decision-makers, who then, via the website/local press provide feedback. Which views had an impact on the continued political decision-making process and which were put on ice? Why?

The initiative to highlight an EU-related issue of social importance may also come from the **citizens/civil society**; from individuals, associations or networks. These issues can cover a variety of topics, ranging from the temperance movement to the climate to agriculture. The citizens/civil society obtain information through their own channels and/or through the EU's information channels. The issues are then handled in the same way as described above.

When people whose paths would not normally meet, meet through non-formal education, new ideas and new insights inevitably come to light.

A kind of cross-fertilisation occurs, and this contributes not only to the development of those present, but also to the development of society as a whole.

This mix is crucial for democracy

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Background

Politicians often talk of the need to increase citizen commitment in EU matters. Often raised questions are: How can we give people a voice? How can we transform the EU from a project for the elite to a project for the people?

Folkbildningsförbundet, the Swedish Adult Education Association (SAEA), would like to contribute to this discussion by highlighting the role that non-formal adult education have in bridging the gap between people and politicians.

It is often claimed that the study circle provides a good grounding in democracy for the individual. This is correct, but adult education associations can also function as a democratic resource in the broader sense of the term. They can assume a distinct democratic role in relation to the social structure. This role serves two purposes. Adult education associations can channel the needs and views of citizens through to political decision-makers and government agencies and they can function as a democratic resource when decision-makers want to inform citizens and hear their opinions. In other words, adult education associations can help bridge the gap between the people and the politicians in accordance with the model described below.

Given the right conditions, there are no limits to how people's interest and commitment can be developed and intensified. Adult education associations strive to ensure that everyone in Sweden has an opportunity to educate themselves, including those who are academically, socially and culturally disadvantaged. By being close to the people – whether in cities, suburbs, rural areas or sparsely populated areas – adult education associations can reach all sorts of people from all walks of life.

But just being there is not enough. Adult education associations

must actively go in search of citizens and inform people of the opportunities they can offer, both directly and by word of mouth. There is no lack of commitment from people; all that's needed is a stable foundation to nurture commitment and help it grow.

Through local activities, people can develop their ability to play an active role in the community. In doing so, they gain a stronger foothold in democracy. Citizens need to be given the opportunity to discuss their local environment without having to take into account political affiliations or other values. The associations can, however, complement the political parties, by tuning in to and channelling the thoughts and ideas of citizens.

According to the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, around 60 per cent of the decisions handled in Sweden's various assemblies are influenced by the EU in one way or another. Using adult education associations to bridge the gap between the people and their elected representatives is one step on the way to achieving greater popular interest for EU issues.



Model for dialog and active citizenship through non-formal adult education:

The European Commission in Sweden provides the municipalities and county councils/regions with information on those EU issues that are "in the pipeline" for the years to come. It could be issues such as the implementation of the service directive, the Lisbon Strategy, the budget review and the need for a constitutional treaty.

The EU Information Centre has been assigned the task by the Swedish parliament (Riksdagen) of providing the general public with objective and politically impartial information about the EU and Sweden's membership.

The municipalities and county councils/regions analyse the challenges from a local/regional perspective and highlight those issues which decision-makers are particularly keen to discuss with citizens and gain broad-based support for. Background material including questions of interest is compiled and distributed to adult education associations.

The adult education associations can produce readily accessible material and arrange special study circles to discuss these issues and they can pass on this information to existing study circles which can take the opportunity to take part in the debate during coffee breaks. This approach also makes it possible to reach lots of participants who would not ordinarily be interested in social issues.

The study circles are the forums where these issues are discussed. The pedagogical approach of the circle means that the participants collectively assume responsibility for the content and structure and ensure that all participants have an opportunity to voice their opinions. At the end of the discussion, a summary of the views is put together and submitted to the adult education association by the study circle leaders. The association compiles all