



A World to live in



A world to live in (2011)

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The photographs are from the study associations
or the participants themselves.

A world to live in

Non-formal adult education plays a prominent and important role in good public health, sustainable development and global justice. These ten good examples, one from each of Sweden's study associations, present just a small selection of all the work we do.





The sewing mothers in Zimbabwe

If you are the parent of a disabled child in Sweden, there is excellent support available, from help with schooling to therapy, aids and personal assistance. If you are the mother of a disabled child in Zimbabwe, there is every chance you will be left on your own. Consequently, many mothers have little choice but to stay at home with their children, making it difficult to work and support a family. “It’s like going a hundred years back in time,” says Lennart Falegård, international project manager at the study association Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan.

Since 2006, the study association has been working with the Zimbabwe Parents of Disabled Children Association, ZPDCA, equivalent to the Swedish association FUB. ZPDCA supports parents and relatives of people with disabilities in Zimbabwe, primarily children. One of its local member organisations is Kusona Kwemadzimai, which in Shona – the language spoken by over 80% of the population – means the sewing mothers.

Sewing their way to freedom

The sewing mothers are now an embroidery cooperative but the road has been a long one. Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan applied for project funding and was able to fund an aid worker who started up the project. Zimbabwe has a high literacy rate so it was easy to produce study material with the women and run training for circle leaders. Taking the study circle as its model, the project has now made it possible for the mothers to work at home and earn a living. New groups are being set up all the time and the business is run by the groups themselves. Today Kusona is an artistic embroidery cooperative making and selling embroidered cards, bags and T-shirts and involving, at its height, 250 women. The women either work at home or bring their children to a meeting place where there are sewing machines, irons and facilities for applying patterns to fabric bags. Together the women have gained greater opportunities for growth and feel a sense of community in doing something together which also supports their families and puts food on the table.

Personal development and school uniforms

In Sweden the study circle means a great deal for personal development, enriching every aspect of people's lives, at work and at play. Attending a study circle and doing interesting things is fun. For the women in the poor suburbs of Harare it also means food for the family and being able to buy school uniforms and bus tickets for their children. They are coming from two completely different starting points.

Lennart says that the most important thing is the enthusiasm and doing something together. Without the embroidery, there would be a major risk of the mothers sitting at home, being dependent on their husband or relatives, if they have any. Another aim of the project has been increasing equality. Initially all the participants were women, but now there are four men on the board who are actively involved. Getting the men, the fathers of the disabled children, on board has raised the status of everyone involved.



Part of the same world

“Collaborative projects like this one are important for us here in Sweden too”, says Lennart. “We gain a greater understanding and become more deeply committed when we know what we are helping to achieve. We

fundraise in Sweden, the embroidery is for sale and several exchange visits have been run for Swedes and for Zimbabweans. Meeting face to face makes it easier for us to understand that we are all part of the same world.”



Deadly drugs on the net – accessible to anyone

In spring 2008 two young people were found dead in a flat in Skelleftehamn in northern Sweden. The two 18 year-olds, a girl and a boy, had recently moved in together in the flat where they were found. It was established that the boy had died of the drug Dextromethorphan, a powder used in cough medicine, which was taken off the Swedish market in 1999. Some of the side effects are cramps, unconsciousness, hallucinations, nausea and stopping breathing. There are three confirmed cases in Sweden of young people dying of the drug, which is available on the internet and can be ordered by anyone. Today you can get hold of drugs without even leaving the house.

After the death in Skellefteå, local film company MCN Produktion produced the film *Dödsdroger på nätet* (Deadly Drugs on the Net) which was shown on TV. The study association Nykterhetens Bildningsverksamhet, NBV, whose core focus is drug prevention, contacted MCN and started a joint project in which NBV bought the rights to show a shortened version of the film. “The film makes people think,” says Katarina Kling-Löfbom, a consultant at NBV in Skellefteå, where a shorter version of the film is used as study material in showings for adults followed by a discussion. She has shown the film to adults who either have children of their own or who work with children or young people.



Just pay and it turns up in the post

In the film, which serves as a basis for discussion, young people, police officers and doctors give their own viewpoints on the issue. Besides the film, there are four shorts with comments from young people talking about how they started using internet drugs, about the side effects, attitudes and about trying to kick the habit. One boy explains how easy it is to order drugs online – “you just pay and then you wait two or three days and then the stuff turns up.” Because the drugs aren’t tested,

no-one knows what the long-term side effects are. Another boy in the film describes his own body as a lab, where he is the test subject. “Anything can happen.”

The young people in the film say taking drugs is worth it, despite the risks. At least they feel good about themselves then, when they are high. Katarina says that adults react to that attitude, it’s hard to understand that young people are prepared to take that kind of risk. Many parents don’t know what their children are doing on the internet and don’t know what they could be doing. For people growing up today, the internet is a normal part of everyday life and they are experts in finding what they are looking for, and sometimes more than they bargained for. Katarina says that if you search on drugs, you’ll get hundreds of pages of hits. As soon as a drug becomes illegal, they change the content slightly so it can be sold again. It’s just like buying anything else online. You can put in an order no matter how old you are, just click the button and the goods arrive in the post. Often drugs are posted in a film case to hide the contents. “The picture of a drug addict as someone who hangs about on street corners or in the central square in Stockholm has changed.”

How can we get our teens feeling good about themselves?

Katarina says that she, and the adults who have seen the film, talk a lot about IT stress. The adults react to the way young people are accessible 24 hours a day. It’s all about being seen, counting the comments on your Facebook page or blog entry. Most friends wins. They never turn off their mobile phones and are receiving texts in their sleep. They never have any peace. Adults have also talked about getting young people to feel good about themselves. It is normal for the teenage years to be tempestuous but many young people think that they are the only ones who feel this bad. How can we as adults talk to our young people and encourage them to talk to each other so that they understand that they are not alone?

Being told to shut up won’t kill us

The film comes with a simple study plan with questions to discuss after the film is shown. NBV’s next step is to invite staff from A&E, the addiction unit and the police and hold a panel debate to describe and discuss the local situation. We have to work together on these issues.

Many adults have questions that they want answered. We want to understand why young people take drugs and change their attitudes. We need to pay attention to how our young people are feeling and support them if they are feeling low, before it is too late. The worst that can happen is that we are told to shut up. That won't kill us. We've all been teenagers.



Singing across borders

Choral singing has been a major public movement in Sweden for over 100 years, with almost 600,000 people singing in various kinds of choir. As well as traditional choirs there are health choirs, anyone-can-sing choirs and workplace choirs. Everybody's singing

Manado State University Choir, MSUC, is a chamber choir with about 20 members from North Sulawesi in Indonesia. In November 2010 the choir visited Stockholm for concerts and workshops.

“The standing ovations were amazing. It really hit home, the audience loved it and they had to sing encores. The best experience in a long time.” As a choir of its time, the choir seeks to build bridges between different cultures and societies to create a peaceful world in which music and culture flourish for everyone. The power of love and spirituality is part of the choir's philosophy.

Lotta Lundell is a producer at Rikskonserten and took the initiative to invite the choir to Stockholm. Together with the study association Kulturens Bildningsförbund, which works with cultural organisations, a lunchtime workshop for Sweden's music and cultural networks was run as part of the choir's visit. The event began with Hannan Rhellam, development manager at Kulturens Bildningsverksamhet singing the Swedish folk song “Ack Värmland du sköna”, which he combined with an Arabic folk song.

Bringing everyone together

MSUC's choral director is the conductor André de Quadros, a human rights activist and professor of music at the University of Boston. Four times a year he travels to Indonesia to work with the choir. When he isn't there, he has recordings of the choir sent to him and coaches them long-distance via skype and e-mail.

Lotta, who has followed the choir, describes how André inspires positive encounters between different people through his work, in which everyone can take part to the best of their ability. Everybody offers and gives each other a lot of scope. Creativity is unleashed through choral singing. The musical content and communication between the choir and the audience is important. André would never stand in front of the choir and take "their" applause. It is important that these meetings take place between everyone.



Singing without borders

The Manado State University Choir can be said to represent a new direction for choral music spanning the globe with music that is cultural, religious and linguistically versatile and encompasses improvisation, choreography, experiment and multicultural encounters. There is a philosophy and an idea behind the way the choir works. The repertoire includes Mendelssohn, Sufi song, Renaissance music and Gospel, Disney songs and improvisation. It is equally important not to polarise different

regions against each other, like different musical styles, but to create meetings between cultures and through art and to be humble in the face of what is created.

André also works with a choir of Palestinian and Jewish singers and a prison choir in Bangkok and organises choir competitions in Indonesia where the choirs compete against themselves. After having performed two songs, the choir is judged and then they receive a certificate, bronze or gold. Everyone can win gold if they are good enough. The gold medal winners with the most points in each genre go forward to the final and a winner in each genre is chosen. As a result, choirs across the whole world can inspire each other, using singing to build bridges and create meetings between different cultures and different countries.



Mobilising against poverty

“Benefits yes, but first real degradation,” says role-play character Madde who has a long “career” of social exclusion. She is acting in the theatre performance *Idyllen* (The Idyll), set up by the study association Sensus as one of the sub-projects for Year of Poverty 2010. Jan Simonsson and Kim Rhedin Hüttner put together the texts and play the roles based on real life stories. Sensus was the study association which, together with ABF, was responsible for coordinating and running activities as part of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. The theme was highlighted in all EU countries with activities, campaigns and projects.

The study associations have direct access to the target groups

“It’s usually government agencies that run these kinds of projects,” says Peter Carlsson at Sensus, project manager for coordinating efforts for the Year of Poverty. “Almost all the organisations in Sweden that are working to combat poverty, with marginalised groups and on exclusion are actually under the study association umbrella, which is why it makes

sense that we were given the job.” ABF ran projects directly with the target group, while Sensus coordinated the 20 sub-projects carried out during the year, comprising conferences, exhibitions and other events. Because the study associations are used to educational methods, project management and working with target groups, the practical side ran extremely smoothly. Sensus was able to support the project in a completely different and more practical way than a government agency would have been able to.



Exhibitions by the homeless and criminals working with prisons

Peter gives examples of projects carried out during the year which brought their participants closer to society. In Malmö ABF launched a photo exhibition. Exhibitors were people who were or had previously been homeless, documenting their poverty and their image of Sweden in their own pictures. Study circles in photography and work on exhibitions were a process that helped participants to start to identify as photographers instead of homeless people, so bringing them back into society.

Another example is the Tjuvgods (Stolen Goods) project, involving ex-criminals and serious drug abusers, many previously homeless, who have decided to turn their lives around. In close cooperation with the Swedish prison and probation service, they work on releasing criminals back into

society. All inmates are given a pack of cards, very popular inside the prison walls. On the back of the cards are addresses and phone numbers which they will know off by heart when they leave the prison and don't know where to go next. They can contact Tjvugods and get help with temporary accommodation and someone to go with them to employment service or social services. The aim is to make the transition to life on the outside easier and reduce the risk of re-offending or drug abuse.



Peter Carlsson at Sensus

Continued focus on exclusion in Europe

A new national campaign for organisations willing to run projects for the target group of the poor is running during spring 2011. This is the first step in a long-term initiative. In the next EU programming period, set to start in 2014, more funds will be allocated to combating poverty. The problem is that the organisations applying tend to be small and poorly funded, without the resources or the expertise in applying for grants. Consequently, the two study associations Sensus and ABF will be applying for a larger grant incorporating several of the organisations that form part of their network and who work directly with the target group. A large application where the study associations take overall responsibility, makes it easier for all the players involved and gives more

people an opportunity to run projects that will improve the lives of people living in poverty or who are socially excluded.

“In the past year I’ve learned that the Swedish social insurance system doesn’t work the way most of us think it does,” says Peter. He has found holes in the system that affect the most vulnerable of all, including Madde in the theatre performance Idyllen.

“It was something of a shock to find out about this,” he says. Poverty is not always visible from the outside. In Europe approximately 84 million people risk living in poverty, according to the EU. The activities of the study associations enable many people to come a step closer towards re-entering society and a life of dignity.



In principle and in practice

In principle, everyone wants to be environmentally aware and work towards a sustainable society, but in practice, when it comes down to it, many of us decide we would rather attend a study circle on weaving or photo editing. Marie Langaard knows all about this. She is regional manager of the study association Medborgarskolan Värmland Örebro, where analysing what people are really doing is all in a day’s work.

“If you are telling people what to do all the time, it puts them off. It needs to be simple, and fun,” she says. Marie read a review of the book “100 Ways to Save the World” by Johan Tell and it captured her interest. The book contains 100 ideas for practical things we can do to create a more sustainable future. The book gives people opportunities.

“For the first time, a book that made me think ‘I never knew that!’ and made me realise that I’m doing lots of good things already, plus advice on how I can do that little bit more. It’s about how small things make a difference.”

Forget all the finger wagging

Marie contacted the author and booked him for a lecture, bought the

book for her staff and suggested offering study circles using the book as a focus for discussion. Her staff thought it was a great idea and they took it even further, offering information events and study circles for the general public. Marie has written a study guide built around three meetings on different themes. The first meeting discusses clothes and food and drink, the second discusses transport, energy/resources and chemicals and the third focuses on change, through influencing politicians and companies and through your own behaviour. At the end of the final session there is a plan for if people want to continue and many of them do. The book is about global justice, sustainable development and public health. Much of the book is about helping you to live a healthier life.

Green tip of the month

To attract participants to the study circles, there is a poster campaign with sustainability tips and a Green tip of the month. Clear, educational headlines, easy to take on board, offering ideas for direct action encourage people to get involved. One poster, showing a beautiful sunlit forest has the text “Clean like the old days. Every year between 40,000 and 50,000 tonnes of cleaning products are sold for domestic use in Sweden, many of which contain substances harmful to the environment. In actual fact all you need is one washing-up liquid or general cleaning product – a green one.” A tip that people can immediately act on in their everyday lives.

There is a huge interest in learning more, both among company staff and individuals who are starting their own study circles. One of the participants told Marie that she now feels that it’s OK to drive her 1950s car for a few weeks in the summer if she lives a climate smart life the rest of the year. You can splash out as long as you make up for it somewhere else. Marie has noticed that there is a generational difference.

“More young people have gone for the book. They seem to be more concerned about values and ethical behaviour, they have to be able to sleep at night.” Older people, who have habits and knowledge that they have amassed since their childhood, have a head start and are definitely interested too.

Liberate us from the best-before date

Marie has also been inspired by the book “100 sätt that rädda maten”(100

ways to save food) and talks about the four sorry apples she turned into “the most delicious dessert ever”.

“We’re suffering from some kind of best-before date obsession that means we throw away everything the instant it’s past the date on the pack. Just smell it and taste it and you’ll be able to tell! We can go shopping 24 hours a day and we buy far more than we can eat. For me there is an immediate value in learning more because I save money that I can spend on something else.”

In one week the Christmas holiday, Marie decided not to throw away any food and to use everything she had in her fridge, freezer and pantry. She made bubble and squeak from all the Christmas dinner leftovers and make jam from old berries in the freezer. Today she buys less and thinks more about whether she will actually use what she does buy.

Set yourself a challenge - live on leftovers for a whole week

According to various surveys, in Sweden we throw away almost 50% of the food we buy. Medborgarskolan is out to turn this around by starting study circles on 100 ways to save food. Marie has produced a study guide to this book too. Author Annica Triberg gives lots of sensible, fun and practical tips for caring for the environment and improving the domestic budget in your own kitchen. The book includes recipes that mean you will hardly ever throw leftovers away again. Because the book also works as a cook book, there have been discussions about whether it would be fun to launch a competition for the best recipe made from leftovers and put it on Facebook. Workplaces could have a “lunchbox week” to make the most of leftovers. There are also plans to start a cookery circle in which participants could learn how to make better use of leftovers. There’s no doubt that participants themselves would come up with lots of good and sustainable ideas for developing the concept.



Fat is between your ears

“Many people who are overweight need to focus on themselves instead of those around them,” says Ingela Bergström, a consultant at the study association Bilda Väst. She is responsible for the public health project Tre M (Three M), run in collaboration with the primary care service in the region of West Götaland. In Swedish the three M’s stand for medical advice, exercise and motivation. They could also stand for people, meeting places and motivation.

Obesity – a public health problem

There is a global increase in the number of people who are obese or overweight. Obesity means a BMI – the measurement that calculates the relationship between weight and height – of over 30. At least 135 million people are obese in Europe alone. Swedes too are gaining weight and according to Statistics Sweden, one in 10 Swedes is too fat. Obesity is classified as an illness by the World Health Organisation and is expected to double in the next 20 years. Global initiatives are needed, not just to halt hunger and poverty, but also to stop obesity destroying and claiming lives.

We become people to each other

Participants in the Tre M project are recruited from the primary health care service and through local advertising. They can be anyone from 30 year-olds to pensioners who have had a weight problems for years. Many suffer from stress, exhaustion and fibromyalgia. The method used for all the parts of the project is Adult Dialogue. This is a way of talking and coming together used by several study associations, based on sharing personal experiences around a common theme, in this case being overweight. Everything said in the group also stays in the group.

The importance of the group for a person changing has been taken up as an important lesson by the other players involved, who are dieticians, physiotherapists and nurses. In the primary care service the patient tends to only meet one person at a time and never experiences the group process. Shared personal stories mean that “we become people to each other”, as Ingela puts it. Of course they talk about food, but for many

people it is vital to talk about being good enough the way you are. If you're happy with yourself and like yourself, you also look after yourself. This is important for the body and the soul. Interaction and contact between the different official bodies makes the whole process visible from the first meeting to the last.



Ingela Bergström at Bilda

More doing than being

Many of the people who have joined the project are people who put themselves out for others but neglect themselves. This is why Ingela says that fat is between the ears. A major focus is therefore placed on improving self-esteem and the importance of putting yourself first.

“If we learn to look after ourselves, we can choose the gym or to go for a walk instead of doing something that we think other people need. Today many of us are “doing” people rather than “being” people. We get our sense of security from what we do, not from what we are.”

The power to take control of your own life

The long-term perspective is important. It's about turning your life around to achieve change. Ingela talks about a woman who had high

self-esteem in her career but low self-esteem in her private life. Her involvement in the project gave her so much power that she retrained, got a new job and started to lose weight. She returned to Ingela, who is also a pastor, and asked whether she would marry her and her husband. Despite the fact that they had lived together for several years, it was only then that the woman felt mature enough to be the focus of attention as a bride. After that, she got help and had gastric bypass surgery. Her life took a completely new turn when she joined the group on her own terms.

“It’s fantastic when people grow and magical to see that the method really works. Looking participants in the eye at the first meeting and at the last meeting are two completely different experiences.”

Ingela is writing material for group leaders which will be handed out to people looking to start groups for people who are overweight. Together with her colleagues she wants to go to the national public health board to present the material and the project. It should be taken nationwide.

“This has to continue” says Ingela. “It’s so important.” And with almost a million Swedes overweight, there’s plenty of work to be done.



Owning your own voice

There are approximately 400,000 Swedish Muslims and just over 30 million Muslims in Europe. Many of the new generation of young Muslims, with differing backgrounds, views of their faith and opinions, are longing to represent themselves. Many find it hard to identify with their parents’ culture or with the often stereotypical picture of Muslims portrayed by the mass media. These young people are educated, speak several languages, were born in the country in which they live and “carry in their hearts a Muslim message of peace” which they want to spread in their own way. One of them is Fazeela Saib, who runs her own company, is studying full-time to become a journalist, works part-time as an aid officer at Islamic Relief and is involved with Peace Agents and Swedish Muslims for Peace and Justice.



Fazeela Saib

An attack on us all

When a suicide bomber blew himself up in central Stockholm in December 2010, Swedish Muslims for Peace and Justice were the first organisation to organise nationwide demonstrations condemning the attack. “The bomb was an attack on us all, whatever our nationality or religion.” The demonstrations attracted global attention and were reported in the US and by the BBC, with a debate between the Sweden Democrats’ Kent Ekeroth and Swedish Muslims for Peace and Justice chairman Yasri Khan. “Being part of an organisation gives us the courage to say what we think and participate in public debate. Non-formal adult education and the folk movement, where we do things together, strengthen the individual. Together anything is possible,” says Fazeela.

From project to folk movement

The study associations Sensus and Ibn Rushd are behind the Peace Agents project in which a hundred young Swedish Muslims are trained in informing people about Islam as a religion of peace. Fazeela is one of them. The key words are self-confidence, knowledge and identity. The Peace Agents concept is now being extended to Europe, training 100 peace agents in each of ten EU countries. Fazeela is one of the people who went to Brussels to lobby the European Commission about the idea.

Work is already in progress in France, Holland and the UK. The situation differs in the different countries but the idea seems to be unique and works everywhere – young Muslims gathering together to work for peace.

The initiative for Swedish Muslims for Peace and Justice came about as a development of the Peace Agents project. The organisation was founded in 1998 and today runs a number of collaborative projects, all of which, in their different ways, seek to work for peace and dialogue. “We make sure we have a trustworthy and realistic image to create a movement which all young Muslims can identify with,” says Fazeela. “All Muslims are involved, with different ethnicities, philosophies, political opinions, religious and secular. By inviting and engaging in debate, Peace Agents and their successors have gained a great deal of positive attention, which has served as inspiration, showing that an open approach is the right method for reaching out and creating a dialogue.” This has encouraged more associations and organisations to follow their example.



Able to be a strong force in society

As a young Muslim woman, Fazeela is caught between different realities, something that has become even more evident since she became a mother. While she receives praise for what she does, she notices that the surrounding climate is getting tougher. “As a Muslim you are constantly questioned. To be able to answer, enter into a dialogue and identify the problems, you have to have self-confidence. If you have a strong sense of who you are, you can also be a strong force in society.”

Both Peace Agents and Swedish Muslims for Peace and Justice provide

strength and support for young Muslims in Sweden, and will soon also be doing so in Europe.



Growing tomatoes on roundabouts

Everything is possible. Even people who live in big cities can grow their own veg. It is not illegal to grow tomatoes on a roundabout or to plant potatoes in a city courtyard. The transition movement encourages people to make better use of the earth's resources, and also to raise awareness of everything that can be done at local level, which might be possible and perfectly permissible, it's just that we might not have thought about it or known anything about it before.

Starting the journey towards external and internal transition

A transport workers' strike in the UK in 2004 clearly demonstrated the country's vulnerability. If the strike had continued for two more days without food being transported, food shortages would have become reality. Out of that event and similar experiences of our vulnerability in the face of climate threats, oil shortages and economic instability, the Transition Movement grew up in autumn 2006. Today it is a popular movement spreading fast across the world with the aim of supporting local initiatives for increased self-sufficiency and a sustainable future. The network believes that people's shared desire, inventiveness and knowledge can create alternatives that make us less vulnerable to climate, environmental and oil crises. Thousands of initiatives are under way across the world, looking at the basic functions of society. In England there are self-sufficient communities with their own economy and own currency. There are steering groups in every country where the transition movement is active. In Sweden it has its own centre in Sala.

An earthship lands

Kristina Eberth is an administrator of studies at the study association Studieförbundet in Gothenburg and Mölndal. "We have so many clubs

and organisations within Studieförbundet working on these issues, even if they haven't been defined as transition issues, and now everyone can do it together. This affects all of us, not just people working on climate change but everyone, even those involved in music, dog breeding or knitting cafés." The transition movement works at grassroots level, in local communities where people lead their daily lives. This is where the study associations operate too.

At Studieförbundet's recurring information events on the transition movement at Café Planet in Gothenburg interest is high. New people are flooding in every time. The age ranges between 25 and 75, with a mix of teachers, students, engineers and farmers. Everyone shares their own knowledge and benefits from other people's. Kristina thinks that the initiative is appreciated so much because people can meet across borders, work together around shared interests and help to pass on knowledge. After the information events, study circles are formed where this commitment goes a step further through practical work. One circle is studying how to build an earthship, a self-supporting house built in recycled materials using car tyres as the frame and with a mound of earth on three of the building's four sides insulating it and keeping the heat in. Others are starting circles in organic farming, how to build homes on wheels or food preservation techniques. The ideas come from the participants' own interests and the knowledge there happens to be in the group. Non-formal adult education has always worked to preserve the knowledge of the past so that it lives on, and this is now in increasing demand.



Kristina Eberth at Studieförbundet

More party than protest

Kristina says that her life is more climate smart now, she eats less meat and feels more positive about the times we live in. Much of the movement is about focusing on opportunities. More party than protest! At a personal level it makes her very happy to be in control of her life and her choices, not just “going with the flow”. In her own courtyard in Gothenburg she plans to get interested neighbours together and look at the options for setting up wind turbines and solar panels. “Local initiatives like this create a sense of community.”



She dreams of a transition party with artists and lectures to celebrate success and keep the flame alive. Ideally in several locations at the same time and in partnership with other study associations. In a not too distance future, she hopes that Gothenburg will become a Transition Town. “Transition thinking can be part of everything we do and a natural part of our lives.”



Meaning at any price

Every Tuesday night the lecture theatre at Lund University is packed with a couple of hundred people who have come together to think, philosophise and discuss the topic of the day. Every term there is a new theme and new questions. Questions are asked about morality, the individual and society, chaos and harmony, people philosophise over our approach to education and investigate whether we really can trust our memories.

“Seeking for meaning is a fundamental human survival mechanism,” says Sven Jönsson, the very researcher who, ten years ago now, organised the programmes for what has become known as the new philosophy circle.

Knowledge firmly grounded in our lives

Arno Werner started the original philosophy circle almost 35 years ago. Sven Jönsson describes him as a frustrated philosophy student who reacted against the educational philosophy of the university in the 1970s, finding it too narrow and too introspective. On a small scale, he started a philosophy circle with five or six students which over time turned into a “unique institution” that builds on people’s interest in philosophical questions and need to study the questions that affect our lives in more depth. The lectures and discussions are interdisciplinary but the emphasis is on philosophy. The purpose is to provide a holistic perspective on our existence and to show the consequences of research on people and the environment in which we live. In the true spirit of non-formal adult education, dialogue, social interaction and anchoring what is learned in practical issues of daily life are also important.

The lectures are carried out in collaboration between the study association Folkuniversitetet and Lund University. They attract a broad range of the general public, primarily older people and younger people. Some of them come every time, others pick and choose. Some just listen to a lecture, others stay all evening and join in the discussion. Sometimes there are so many people that there isn’t enough room for them all.

Contact with old and new ideas

Sven says he does all this for “the love of the people”. “People are so

grateful and happy to be here,” he explains. “The philosophy circle gives ordinary people a chance to come into contact with new and old ideas. This enriches their intellectual and social lives.” In collaborating with the study Association, the circle is also a way for the university to spread knowledge to people other than those who are registered as university students. Everyone is welcome and it is all free of charge.

Over the years Sven has managed to recruit 300 – 350 lecturers. The content is important. The lecturers are experts in their fields but not always familiar to the majority of the population. It is never hard to attract lecturers, even if the fee only consists of books worth a small sum. The philosophy circle has a good reputation and is regularly mentioned in the press. Giving a lecture here is seen as a plus. Something to add to your CV. All the lectures are recorded and the sound files are put on the net, available to everyone.



Sven Jönsson

How can we live together?

Next term the theme is political philosophy, about how we can live together. Speakers will include former Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson with Sverker Oredsson on the changed role of politics in a globalised world. Ulrika Holgersson will speak on class - feminist perspectives on the return of an old concept in politics and popular culture, while Håkan Arvidsson will be looking at whether the distinction between left and right in politics is still meaningful.

Seeking and deepening the meaning of life

“The philosophy circle is an extraordinary success,” says Sven. It is based on continuity, is well-known, and takes place at the same time and in the same place every week. It is something people talk about in the canteen at work and it’s also through friends, acquaintances and colleagues that new participants find their way here. Sven thinks that reflection is part of human nature.

“To be able to cope in a complex existence, we need perspective, particularly because there are more and more of us. This doesn’t mean that we find the right interpretation every time but we might identify contexts and connections that help us to gain a more nuanced understanding of what we experience and find meaning in what we see.”



Non-formal adult education works everywhere

A Bolivian refugee came to Östhammar in the 1990s. When he studied Swedish with the Workers’ Educational Association, ABF, he came into contact with non-formal adult education and thought this teaching method ought to be used by the unions in Bolivia. He talked to COD, the Bolivian equivalent of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, and so ABC was born, run in partnership with ABF in Sweden. Initially study circles and courses were run focusing on social issues and union issues. Over time, circles on the environment, crafts and cooperative movements were added. Due to the turbulent situation in Bolivia, the education initiative cut loose from COD and instead continued as separate units, currently with around 20,000 participants a year.

Wealth for the people

Seventy percent of the population of Bolivia is indigenous. There are 36 different Indian groups and the same number of languages. Åke Söderman, ombudsman for the ABF district in the County of Gävleborg, explains how the country managed to survive a number of coups and

develop. From a government which oppressed the indigenous population with armed violence, Bolivia is now a country with a democratically elected president and strong support from the indigenous population. A national literacy campaign has been initiated and everyone now has the right to their own language. The indigenous population who were previously sidelined and oppressed are now fully participating in society and the country's wealth is increasingly being retained by its population.

People wanting to achieve something together

Åke says that they started by using the Swedish forms of non-formal adult education with study circles and cultural events. Gradually they realised that these had to be adapted to suit people's lives and reality in Bolivia. If it takes a circle participant four hours to get to the place where the circle is being held, all-day meetings work better than repeated three-hour sessions. If the water runs out or the electricity goes off, you have to be flexible and rethink things. The most important thing is that there are people who want to achieve something together and can learn from each other. Passing on knowledge using non-formal adult education as the method works everywhere, as long as you are able to adapt. Every year around 40 people are trained as circle leaders. The courses discuss group dynamics and leadership style but traditional teachers are not required. The important thing is for everybody to share their own experiences.



Participating in social development

For ABF, the most important thing is for ordinary people in Bolivia to have the chance to learn things that are important to them as individuals, e.g. participation in social development and political life, starting cooperatives to become self-supporting and gaining new skills to enable them to apply for better jobs. All these aspects are important. 75 – 60 percent of the people attending ABC's courses are women. A group of women in Chochabamba have started a consumer cooperative where they purchase goods together to reduce their food costs and help to fund the ABC organisation. Åke also has a plan to start a consumer cooperative to produce school dinners for the municipality which has already received funding for this. Local initiatives can make the units self-supporting.

In referendums ABC has informed people and started study circles to pass on information about the different choices. This has helped a larger proportion of the population to take part in the referendum.

Now all the Bolivian people count

“ABF has been and is part of Bolivia's development and that's something we're really proud of,” says Åke. “We see the importance of it when we travel out to the clay houses up on the high plateau or in Amazonas with deprived residential areas where people meet and are happy and do things together. Our work has helped to develop society so that all of the Bolivian population counts. A hundred years ago Sweden was one of the poorest countries in Europe, people emigrated to escape poverty and oppression. Popular movements then started to lift the country and non-formal adult education was part of that. When there was a general strike in Sweden in 1909 Sweden received financial support from Uruguay. Now Sweden can give something back, but who knows what things will look like in a hundred years' time ?”





A world to live in

Participating in the work of the study associations gives many people an opportunity to reflect on their own lives and those of others. This creates self-determination and a chance to change ourselves and the world in which we live.

Non-formal adult education plays a prominent and important role in good public health, sustainable development and global justice. These ten good examples, one from each of Sweden's study associations, present just a small selection of all the work we do.

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