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THE IMPACT OF COMPUTERIZATION ON POPULATION REGISTRATION IN SWEDEN

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FOREWORD

With computerization of the civil registration process gaining momentum in many industrialized countries as well as some developing nations it is interesting to see how this movement has impacted civil registration, in one of the countries in which civil registration has the longest history. As in other Scandinavian countries, Sweden has integrated the civil registration system into the more comprehensive population registration system. While computerization has reduced the cost of population registration and improved the quality of information, the author notes that "the general public have not been affected to any great extent by the fact that the local registration has been computerized". She also notes that "The basic need for population registration information could also be satisfied perfectly well before computerization of the local registers".

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INTRODUCTION

In Sweden, population registration is now fully computerized. However, the basic principles for the present method of working originated in the manual processing that existed previously. A review of how the register functioned before would therefore in different ways promote an understanding of how population registration functions today and also provide ideas about how even a less computerized system could satisfy perfectly well the need in society for access to population information.

Population registration has age-old traditions in Sweden. Parish registration existed as early as the 16th century, and in 1686 the first national directive was issued. At that time Sweden was frequently at war with one or other of its neighbors. Most of these wars was successful, due partly to the fact that through population registration it was possible to raise new armies. In the middle of the 18th century all the country's inhabitants were registered. This success was due largely to the important role played by the Church in Swedish society, which ensured strict social control.

Registration was conducted in every parish and consisted initially of records of so-called catechistical interviews. This was followed by registration in special books, in which all births, marriages and deaths were recorded. There was also a real estate book where every person moving into or out of the parish was registered. The process of registering these events has always been an integral part of the population registration process. When needed, extracts from the books could be obtained easily at any time. The only obstacle was the fact that all the books and interview records were stored in one particular place, and that they belonged to the parish. Proof of birth, marriage and so on had to be issued by the parish that had made the initial registration.

REMOVAL CERTIFICATE

To ensure that correct information was available about current addresses and to make it possible for the general public to obtain a certificate of birth, marriage etc. in their home town - even though the event in question happened at another place - a document was introduced called the removal certificate. When a person planned to move, a certificate was requested on which the parish office noted important information. After the person moved, he or she handed the certificate to the new parish office which then registered the move with up-to-date personal details. The

introduction of the removal certificate also assisted the control process to ensure a person was not registered as a resident in more than one place.

PERSONAL PAPER FILE - PERSONAL IDENTITY NUMBER

The most important change, both for the individual and the population registration process as a whole, was the introduction of the personal paper file and the personal identity number in 1947. When a person moved to another parish, his or her personal paper file was also moved. By transferring the document it was no longer necessary to write out the details once again and the risk of making mistakes in the transfer process was reduced. The birth, marriage and death registers were still maintained although they were not really needed.

By the 1950's, population registration became a process for facilitating the collection of taxes, checking tax returns, maintaining social statistics and regulating the labour market. In the 1960's this became even more widespread with the introduction of EDP. Since then there has been less need for the individual to inform government agencies and private organizations about changes. The personal identity number has made the information exchange process simple and straightforward.

The personal identity number has 10 digits and consists of three parts - date of birth (six digits), birth number (three digits) and a verification digit. Once a person has been allocated a personal identity number she or he keeps it for life, unless it needs to be corrected for some reason. The personal identity number has become widely used as an identification code, not only for population registration but also in other areas of administration, e.g. as a conscript number, as part of the national insurance scheme and on driving licenses and passports.

COMPUTERIZATION OF THE LOCAL POPULATION REGISTRATION PROCESS

In 1991, responsibility for population registration was transferred from the parish offices to the Tax Administration. The parish offices continued working with the registration of church members although they had nothing to do with population registration. In conjunction with this shift of responsibility, the population registers were transferred to population information systems. The information in the personal paper files was entered and transferred to integrated databases. Generally this

represented very little change for the individual. Extracts were printed instead of typed and they were issued by the local tax office instead of the local parish.

COLLECTION OF INFORMATION FOR POPULATION REGISTRATION

The governing principle in today's population registration is to gather information as close to the source as possible. Hospitals are obliged to report births and deaths to the Tax Authority as soon as possible. As the majority of births and deaths occur in hospital, most of them are reported. After a child has been born, the parents are obliged to notify the local tax office about the child's forename within three months. The person conducting a marriage must notify the Tax Authority, giving relevant details. When a court pronounces judgment in a divorce, annuls a marriage or establishes paternity, the court informs the Tax Authority. A person who moves from one house to another, into the country or out of it, is obliged to notify the Tax Authority about his or her new address. As registration is a condition for entitlement to many benefits, including child benefit and sickness benefit, a high volume of moves and immigrations are reported.

WORKING METHODS FOLLOWING COMPUTERIZATION

As mentioned previously, the Swedish population registration is now completely computerized. The information that was previously recorded in various manual parish registers is now recorded in local computer registers at each tax office. The computer system used for the notification of population information in society has remained generally unchanged since 1967. Two guiding principals for population registration remain unchanged, i.e. population registration information is moved when a person moves and a child's birth is always registered in the place in which the mother is registered. Prior to moving, information was transferred by means of a moving certificate and a personal file. Today information is transferred electronically. It would have been quite possible to have the same level of functionality by building a central system to which all local authorities had access via terminals. However, it was generally felt that for reasons of integrity it would be less appropriate in Sweden to have a register that contained information about the whole population.

Registration of information about a child's birth is facilitated considerably by registration taking place at the local office at which the mother is registered, irrespective of where the child was born.

The task of registering the population has been simplified through computerization. It is quicker because a task never needs to be registered more than once. The information necessary for a decision to be made is available via the terminal. Updating the register, through which information

can be distributed in society, is carried out mechanically. Previously it was necessary to send a paper document to a computer centre, which then carried out the registration in the EDP register.

The basis for conducting the process on a local level, however, always remains the same - information is collected, verified and registered.

REGISTRATION OF A BIRTH

As an example of how the system works, the following are the various stages that are followed in conjunction with the registration of a birth.

- The hospital or midwife who assisted at the birth reports the birth in writing to the local tax office where the mother is registered. Should the form be sent by mistake to the wrong tax office, it is then forwarded to the correct office with the aid of information available via the terminal. Even before the local register was computerized, the form was forwarded to the correct place of registration although it was often more arduous to find the correct place.

- The person dealing with the case at the local office registers the birth application and produces details of the mother via the terminal. If the mother is married, the person dealing with the case also retrieves information about the father. Using this information, an assessment can then be made about the surname, citizenship etc. under which the child will be registered.

- The parents are then notified through the local register about the personal identity number the child has been allocated and they are given a form to register the child's forename.

- If the mother is not married, the local tax authority informs the social services committee who are obliged to ensure the paternity is established.

- In conjunction with the birth, the system is updated to allow distribution of population registration information. In the case of a birth, for example, details are sent to the following authorities.

The National Social Insurance Board handles different social benefits, such as children's allowance, through its local office. The children's allowance is paid out automatically when the board has been informed of the birth.

County council and municipal authorities SPAR, through whose register banks, insurance offices and customer registers at different companies, are updated.

Statistics Sweden are informed to update population statistics. By means of reports from the population registration process, changes in the population structure can be monitored on an ongoing basis.

PROVISION OF POPULATION REGISTER INFORMATION

Since 1967 the distribution of information to other authorities by means of EDP has reduced the need for extracts from the population register. The process is still continuing. All the larger government agencies and some private organizations use file transfer to update their own registers with records from the population registers. They also use certain on-line communication to check marital status, place of residence etc. The Swedish population registration procedure does not include any birth or marriage certificates or national identity cards that can be forged or counterfeited. Nor are they issued by any other official body. The extracts from the population register are easy to arrange but are not regarded as original documents, and their accuracy is easy to verify as basic details are readily available in the population register.

SUMMARY

In summary it can be said that computerization has considerably reduced the cost of population registration. The quality of the information has also been improved as computerization allows mechanical controls.

The work of the staff has been facilitated although the basic task of gathering, verifying and registering information on a local level still remains.

The general public have not been effected to any great extent by the fact that the local registration has been computerized. Involvement of the individual has been reduced as the demand for extracts from the population register is decreasing.

The basic need for population registration information could also be satisfied perfectly well before computerization of the local registers.

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