

EVOLUTION OF INTEGRATION INITIATIVES BY THE SWEDISH RED CROSS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT IN THE 1990s AND 2015¹

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Introduction

■ Since World War II, many European nations have undergone significant immigration, including Sweden, which has a longstanding history of immigration and has accommodated large numbers of refugees through resettlement programs. In the wake of these massive influxes of immigration, many countries, including Sweden, had to find strategies for dealing with “the integration of new groups”. According to research, nation-states and welfare state programs have grappled with difficulties in integrating immigrants into the social structures of their host communities (Heckmann-Schnapper, 2003). It was necessary to apply new measures after a large number of refugees arrived, mostly from the Middle East, former Yugoslavia, and Somalia, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Nonetheless, Sweden’s “refugee crisis” highlights how crucial the involvement of civil society organizations is in both reception and integration (Hansen, 2018). Every actor, including the national government, NGOs, and municipalities, has specific responsibilities and must make its own choices to adapt to this significant shift. This study adopts a historical and comparative approach to analyze the role of the Swedish Red Cross (SRC) in facilitating the integration of newly arrived immigrants, focusing on the same case

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across two distinct time periods (in the refugee resettlement in 2015 and onward and in the previous large refugee experience in the 90s).

A detailed and retrospective analysis of the variations in the organization's integration efforts throughout the corresponding time periods has been made possible by the use of a comparative perspective. In order to evaluate prevailing discourses regarding the relationship between SRC and the Swedish authorities in relation to the refugee crisis, this paper draws on interviews and documents. Within the framework of the concept of civil society, this study theoretically examines whether SRC's integration activities have been characterized by a bottom-up or top-down approach. Specifically, it explores the extent to which these activities have fostered hierarchical or participatory dynamics in NGO-led community-building efforts, and whether they have primarily contributed to state-driven integration policies or grassroots agency and solidarity formation. Given that the state frequently shares the task of providing social services with local authorities and non-governmental organizations, the study's findings indicate that SRC is currently more visible in the field. Thus, by concentrating on SRC, this study adds to the corpus of academic research on the function of NGOs in the integration of newly arrived.

Regarding the structure of the paper, first, we delve into NGOs in welfare states: to better understand the current structure of the relationship between the state and NGOs in the welfare state, it is useful to briefly look at its history. Next, we explain the Swedish integration policy and programs by reviewing earlier and recent research, followed by an exploration of the concept of civil society. The methodology section outlines the approach used in the study. The analytical section discusses the dynamics between state and civil society, focusing on the role of the Swedish Red Cross in refugee integration during the 1990s. This is followed by a discussion of evolving partnerships, particularly how the Swedish Red Cross and the state collaborated in refugee integration post-2015. The final section concludes with a discussion and summary of the findings.

NGOs in the Welfare State

The volunteer sector in Sweden has a history that stretches back to the nineteenth century, and a significant aspect of that history is its interaction with the government (Lundström, 1996). Tommy Lundström discusses the significance of historical perspective in order to elucidate the position of the voluntary sector within the welfare state of Sweden. The founding of charities in the 1840s is the first turning point that is thought to be significant in comprehending the state of the sector and the changes that occur today. The second is the role of voluntary organizations with the rise of social policy discourse in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the third is the reduction in voluntary sector activities after the welfare state was established (Lundström, 1996). There are discussions now about a propensity for



an Anglo-Saxon approach that highlights the function of nonprofits as providers of services (Hiilamo, 2015). New groups that offered education and assistance to the impoverished started to fill the void created by the institutions that had previously held power in the 19th century as a result of the central state and the state church becoming weaker (Lundström, 1996).

Lundström explains that with the rise of the welfare state, areas of activity previously dominated by the voluntary sector were transferred to the national government and municipalities. Despite this shift, voluntary organizations still play a supportive role in certain domains. Notably, this transition occurred through mutual agreement, indicating that the public sector assumed responsibility for voluntary social services without any disputes (Lundström, 1996). For example, SRC began providing home aid to sick individuals in 1920 and worked with the municipalities to carry it out. The government therefore gave preference to municipalities that provided these services and provided subsidies to those that conducted these operations inside their borders. Similarly, although providing home support to the elderly was a primary Red Cross activity in the 1950s, municipalities took over this role in the 1960s (Lundström, 1996).

This new policy on subsidies effectively restricted municipalities from benefiting from the services of voluntary organizations, even though these organizations continued their activities (Lundström, 1996). It is emphasized that the government's assumption of social services with the development of the welfare state was not intended to undermine the role of the voluntary sector but rather to expand access to these services for a broader population. The relationship between the state and the voluntary sector is characterized by close collaboration and integrative processes. While the Swedish voluntary sector played a significant role in areas such as sports and adult education, its impact on social services and healthcare was minimal. Nonetheless, the voluntary sector served as a complementary force in areas where the public sector was active (Lundström, 1996).

NGOs and Migration Governance in Sweden: Responses to the Bosnian and Syrian Refugee Crisis

The literature on the refugee crisis can be approached from multiple perspectives. While some studies examine migration and integration policies adopted in Sweden in the aftermath of the crisis, others highlight the role of civil initiatives in responding to refugees, and still others foreground the perspectives and experiences of the refugees themselves. The present review engages with these strands of scholarship, while also considering the dynamics of interaction between civil society actors and Swedish state authorities.

Dahlstedt and Neergaard (2016) argue that Europe is in crisis regarding restrictive migration policies, the rise of radical right parties, and changing attitudes



towards migration and refugee agency in recent years. Through the Swedish case, the authors aim to analyze these changes in Sweden, inspired by historical and sociological perspectives.

The Swedish welfare model, developed after World War II, is widely recognized around the world as a successful balance between capitalism and socialism. It is based on Keynesian ideas, focusing on keeping people employed through active labor market policies and government efforts to boost the economy. In addition to low unemployment and a strong connection to the market, Sweden also offers wide-ranging social insurance programs and public services (Esping-Andersen, 1990). However, since the late 1980s, particularly after the economic crisis of the early 1990s, the model has undergone significant neoliberal reforms under both left- and right-leaning governments. These changes prioritize individual autonomy, flexibility, and market competitiveness over centralized welfare provision. Economic policy has overtaken social policy, and welfare expenditures are increasingly viewed as production costs rather than tools for redistribution. Although not entirely replaced, the traditional model has shifted toward one where citizens' duties are emphasized over their rights, and welfare is increasingly linked to labor market performance rather than universal entitlement (Dahlstedt and Neergaard, 2016).

Dahlstedt and Neergaard (2016) consider the Nordic welfare model's (especially Sweden's) viability in the face of expanding neoliberal reforms and the growing power of right-wing populist (ERP) parties. With reference to Polanyi's theory on the backlash against market expansion in the 1920s–30s, the authors suggest that contemporary right-wing populism may represent a similar reaction to neoliberalism. Although the Nordic welfare regime is not disappearing entirely, it faces fragmentation, with Sweden showing both signs of regression—such as restrictive migration laws and normalized ERP rhetoric—and resistance, including strong anti-racist mobilization. Neoliberal economic changes since the 1990s, including deregulation, privatization, and increased inequality, have weakened traditional social democratic structures. These shifts have led to tensions between market-driven and public welfare ideals, and between inclusive gender regimes and exclusionary migration policies. The authors question whether we are witnessing the emergence of a new Nordic model shaped by exclusionary politics, and they highlight the need for further research to determine whether this is a transformation, fragmentation, or partial end of the traditional Scandinavian welfare model.

On the one hand, Asztalos Morell (2019) discusses how Sweden, once regarded as a humanitarian leader in welcoming refugees, saw a notable change in its asylum policies following the 2015 refugee crisis. The author highlights that Sweden received the highest number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in relation to its population, with Afghan youngsters being the largest part of this group. However, the introduction of economic measures and an increasingly securitized asylum regime from 2016 onwards led to practices such as medically based age assessments and the “writing up” of minors' ages, often resulting in rejected



asylum claims and deportations. Morell (2019) also notes that this is part of a broader European trend where migration governance prioritizes state control and border security over humanitarian protection.

Another noteworthy point emphasized in the article is the participation of civil society in these exclusionary policies, focusing particularly on the emergence of the Facebook page “Stop the deportation of Afghan youth!” Morell articulated that this platform not only positioned itself as a space for practical support but also as a site of political resistance, where youth and citizens collectively challenged the legitimacy of Sweden’s deportation regime. In doing so, the article introduces and elaborates on the theoretical frameworks of “pragmatic voluntarism” and “subversive humanitarianism.” As Morell (2019) argues, these notions enable us to understand the dual nature of civil engagement regarding meeting immediate needs and advocacy. In hindsight, the article contributes to the growing body of literature that examines how grassroots movements and digital platforms mediate inclusion and resistance within increasingly restrictive asylum contexts in Europe.

Escobar and Ahl’s (2024) study examines the advancement of the steps taken by civil society groups in Sweden in 2015 to improve integration services for refugees. The study looks at how Sweden’s civic society handled the refugee issue, especially after the 2015 wave, and whether or not that engagement has persisted over time. Sweden’s system for receiving refugees was under high pressure in 2015 when it accepted 163,000 asylum seekers. In order to assist in handling the issue, the government started “early intervention” strategies and engaged civil society, with associations and volunteers playing a vital role. Years later, though, project financing had drastically dropped. This study investigates whether the initial commitment to refugee integration has had a lasting impact and examines whether civic society’s integration efforts after 2015 have been sustained.

Moreover, the writers address whether and why this continuity differs throughout organizations. The results show that organizations found it challenging to continue their work because of the bureaucratic constraints associated with funding and a discrepancy between the expectations of donors and the needs of migrants. As an exception, immigrant groups persisted in their operations as integration work was already a part of their primary purpose, and they were not dependent on outside funding. A few other examples kept up the pace by developing strong, local partnerships or adjusting to new forms, such as social businesses. Because the initiatives could not be continued within the organization’s official structure once external assistance expired, most organizations were unable to incorporate these efforts into their long-term operations (Escobar and Ahl, 2024).

In a similar vein, Jämte and Pitti (2019) investigate the relationship and the image that results from this collaboration between field actors, including civil society organizations and government institutions or social movements, who are engaged in welcoming and aiding refugees arriving in Sweden, which became the target destination country in 2015. The authors highlight the significance of social



movements and activists in welcoming migrants by attempting to illustrate this using the example of Malmö, one of the refugee entry locations in Sweden. Furthermore, SMOs frequently moved more quickly than other players, namely, well-established NGOs and governmental organizations—and showed significant success in the field during the initial intervention.

One of the key points highlighted in the article is that no single organization is sufficient to manage a crisis alone, and that cooperation is of inevitable importance. From a historical perspective, in the relationship between NGOs and the state in Sweden during the 1900s, civil society tended to see itself not as a rival to the state, but as a partner. In the following years, this position shifted and evolved to a different point. In this new context, while the activities of social movements became surrounded by debates, new laws, restrictions, and repressive practices were introduced to manage internal opposition. The long-standing model of state-civil society relations in Sweden, though showing signs of weakening, remains a significant feature. Jämte and Pitti (2019) argue that this enduring connection is evident in several areas: the formal ties between civil society and state entities, the sustained funding and infrastructural support provided to civil society, and the often-close interactions at the municipal level between civil society organizations and institutionalized political structures.

Frykman and Mäkelä (2019) discuss the motivations and perceptions of civil actors in Malmö, the first destination for refugees arriving in Sweden, as well as interactions and conflicts with other actors. Based on interviews with NGO volunteers from Refugees Welcome to Malmö, the authors explore the communication and tensions between volunteer groups and Swedish authorities.

In light of Frykman and Mäkelä's (2019) findings before the government stepped in, Refugees Welcome to Malmö was instrumental in handling refugee admissions, collaborating with organizations like the Red Cross and the Salvation Army. At first, there was a great deal of cooperation and intercultural harmony, but conflicts arose over status, pragmatic methods, and interactions with authorities. Disagreements emerged between groups over different approaches and views of collaboration with the local authorities, as well as between volunteers and police over the transportation of migrants. Many volunteers felt ignored and undervalued once the authorities assumed control, despite their vital role in averting a humanitarian catastrophe. They were subjected to limitations and marginalized. Later, officials and volunteers agreed that organized long-term collaboration was necessary for upcoming emergencies.

The study also examines whether volunteering during the 2015 refugee crisis in Sweden, particularly in Malmö, was a political act. Initially, Sweden had a welcoming stance toward refugees, but by late 2015, public attitudes had shifted toward hostility, reflected in the rise of the Sweden Democrats and incidents like attacks on asylum accommodations. The final discussion in the article states that the Refugees Welcome to Malmö project, "encounters" took place not just between volunteers and refugees, who were said to be grateful, but also between volunteers and authorities,



occasionally leading to cooperation, competition, or confrontation. Thus, despite not becoming a permanent NGO, Refugees Welcome to Malmö served as an inspiration for subsequent projects aimed at empowering and integrating refugees, like Refugees Welcome Housing (Frykman and Mäkelä, 2019).

In conjunction with literature discussing how the integration policies and programs are characterized by the Scandinavian welfare states, there is also literature drawing attention to the voices of refugees themselves. Gregg Bucken-Knapp, Vedran Omanovic, and Andrea Spehar (2020) in *Institutions and Organizations of Refugee Integration* bring up how refugees see themselves as an agency during integrating into their new host society. The authors adopt a comparative approach that deals with the refugees who came to Sweden from Bosnia and Herzegovina and more recently from Syria. In doing so, they mention that refugee experiences that emerge in programs and initiatives are produced in order to support integration. The book, which involves the remarks of immigrants about how they have experienced the integration process, enables us to gain insight into the difficulties, achievements, or conveniences experienced on the way to integration. Thus, these subjective experiences are discussed in the book as objective indicators of the real integration process and serve as a map of how integration works in the host society. However, there are a few points about the integration of immigrants that draw attention.

The authors highlight the characteristics of the country where immigrants come from and the importance of immigrant-specific factors. Moreover, economic, social, and other situations in the host country during periods of large migration are effective in initiatives related to integration. For example, the authors analysing the case of Bosnian who came to Sweden in the 90s state that the economic conditions in Sweden negatively affected the labour market and therefore the immigrant group during this period when Sweden received the most asylum applications. On the other hand, the fact that there was an excess of housing in many municipalities in the 90s and that this situation allowed many Bosnians to find housing close to both education and employment opportunities is an example of the impact of the positive conditions in the host country (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2020).

Along with these ongoing discussions in the book, despite the differences in conditions and the integration policy in the two separate periods compared, it is concluded that Bosnian and Syrian refugees still have some similarities regarding this process. According to one of these outcomes, integration institutions are mostly not seen by refugees as fulfilling their needs. These examples remind us of the significance of cooperation with civil society in integration. This study on the refugee experience in the nineties and the differences and similarities of the current refugee crisis gives us information about how state-provided programs are perceived by refugees. The challenging processes that emerge after the intense waves of migration, along with the troubled conditions of the country, reveal the importance of burden-sharing. Undoubtedly, non-governmental organizations are making important initiatives to support the integration of immigrants. Although the

subject of this book is not the contribution of civil society to integration, the book, which includes immigrant experiences, is a unique opportunity to understand the deficiencies and gaps in integration and to discuss this through the example of civil society. Thus, the book provides us with a remarkable perspective for an analysis of the responsibilities that NGOs, called the third sector, have taken or should take for refugee integration.

The concept of civil society

The concept of civil society has a deep-rooted history, particularly in Western society. As noted by Arato and Cohen (1994), the tendency to view non-institutional movements and initiatives alongside established institutions as an integral part of civil society is found earlier in the West than in the East. Numerous studies have been conducted on the concept of civil society, leading to a broader literature on the subject. However, it is challenging to identify a common definition when examining the definitional studies of the concept.

One prominent definition of the concept of civil society comes from the American sociologist and leading figure in democracy studies, Larry Diamond (1994). According to Diamond's definition in his work "Toward Democratic Consolidation," civil society is a voluntary, self-producing, (largely) self-sustaining, autonomous from the state, and organized social sphere dependent on a legal order or a set of common rules. Assessing the contributions of civil society to democracy, Diamond emphasizes the need to highlight what civil society is and is not. When discussing the functions of civil society, Diamond (1994) highlights several points. Firstly, civil society is seen as an institution concerned with public rather than private purposes, thus distinguishing it from society and acting as an intermediary institution between the state and the private sphere. The second prominent characteristic of civil society is its relationship with the state. However, despite this connection, civil society does not aspire to hold political power within the state as an independent institution. Its focus is on ensuring that the state operates in an accountable manner. A third distinguishing point is the pluralistic and diversity-oriented character of civil society (Diamond, 1994).

Furthermore, the first and most fundamental democratic function of civil society is expressed as follows:

"The basis for the limitation of state power, hence for the control of the state by society, and hence for democratic political institutions as the most effective means of exercising that control" (Diamond, 1994).

In this regard, Diamond (1994) argues that this characteristic has two separate dimensions: monitoring or limiting the exercise of authority in democratic states and democratizing authoritarian states. In this case, as advocated in Habermas's



view of the public sphere, it can be considered that the spaces enabling the coming together of civil society contribute to democratizing authoritarian states.

Another prominent definition of civil society in literature belongs to John Keane. Keane (1998) notes that many authors describe the term 'civil society' in different contexts, referring to interconnected civil society organizations such as market economies, households, charitable groups, clubs and voluntary associations, independent churches, and publishing houses. His own definition of civil society is as follows:

"Civil society, as I used the term and still do, is an ideal-typical category that both describes and envisages a complex and dynamic ensemble of legally protected non-governmental institutions that tend to be non-violent, self-organizing, self-reflexive, and permanently in tension with each other and with the state institutions that frame, constrict and enable their activities" (Keane, 1998).

According to Goran Ahrne (1996), most authors conceptualize civil society as relationships that go beyond the family but are not within the realm of the state. In this regard, it can be said that Keane's definition of civil society as quoted above is consistent with this view. Karel B. Müller (2006), who discusses both the empirical and normative aspects of civil society, distinguishes it socio-culturally and economically. In the socio-cultural context, groups referred to as maximalists see civil society more as a non-governmental space, as expressed by Ahrne. For example, John Keane (1998) mentions 'non-state public organizations' such as churches, professional organizations, and political parties as components of modern civil society. Minimalists, on the other hand, do not consider churches as forms of civil society; they see civil society not only as separate from the state and the market but also as opposed to them. According to them, just like the state, the market cannot provide the necessary support for social solidarity. However, they emphasize the existence of voluntary associations and social movements as the most important formations of civil society (Müller, 2006). According to this understanding, these institutions exhibit behavior not directed towards the market and display minimal hierarchical levels.

Drawing on the idea of civil society, this paper explores the decisions, changes, and goals related to refugee integration by examining the initiatives of the Swedish Red Cross. The focus of this study is primarily on the Swedish Red Cross's relationship with the state in its integration efforts. Framed by the question: how does SRC define its relationship with the state in its work on integration? This research emphasizes the pivotal role of state-NGO cooperation in the integration process.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing upon the aforementioned approaches, this working paper seeks to focus on the evolving relationship between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the state in Sweden, particularly in the context of refugee integration, during the critical period of the 1990s and 2015, within the framework of Adil Najam's "Four C



Model". Moving beyond simple dichotomies, Najam's (2000) framework suggests that the nature of CSO-government relations is fundamentally determined by the convergence or divergence of preferred goals (outcomes) and preferred strategies (means) among the actors involved. This approach is particularly salient in the Swedish context, which is known for its strong tradition of welfare and extensive state-civil society cooperation but is facing new pressures and challenges that may have changed these established patterns during 2015.

The Four-C's Model proposes four ideal-type relationships: Cooperation (similar goals, similar means), Confrontation (dissimilar goals, dissimilar means), Complementarity (similar goals, dissimilar means), and Co-optation (dissimilar goals, similar means) (Najam, 2000). This framework allows for a nuanced examination of how Swedish civil society actors, particularly those involved in humanitarian aid and integration efforts in the course of the 1990s and the 2015 refugee crisis, have interacted with various state agencies.

Methodology

The study is based on qualitative methods, dividing the main source materials into two categories. The study was carried out through a combination of archival data (annual reports, journal of the International Red Cross, and news on the organization's website, etc.), which was supplemented by qualitative interviews with employees working on integration issues. A categorization was made by determining the themes concerning the research aim in the Swedish Red Cross reports between 1991–1999 and 2015–2019. In addition, the 1989–2000 issues of the International Review of the Red Cross, a peer-reviewed journal published by the International Red Cross Committee, were scrutinized by selecting articles on the Swedish Red Cross's activities for refugees. The journal especially informs readers about the activities and policies of the Red Cross.

The purpose of conducting interviews is to gain more knowledge of the changes that have emerged in conjunction with the most recent large refugee resettlement and to talk about the experiences of staff as a voice of the organization. The semi-structured interviews consist of questions related to integration activities of the Swedish Red Cross and cooperation with the state and other institutions. Bogdan and Biklen (2006) highlight that during data analysis, recurring words, behaviors, or events can be identified, allowing for the creation of coding categories. They emphasize the importance of developing these categories after data collection, using codes such as activity, process, event, and strategy codes to organize and sort data. In this study, categories were identified from prominent themes in texts and interviews, aiming to explain the changes over time in the collaboration between SRC and the Swedish state in integration initiatives.



State-Civil Society Dynamics: The Role of the Swedish Red Cross in Refugee Integration During the 1990s

Following the large-scale refugee resettlements of the 1990s, municipalities began collaborating with non-governmental organizations to support integration efforts. In this context, SRC's international meeting centers played a key role in assisting municipal integration services. These centers, along with local Red Cross branches, provided refugees with a range of services, including housing, employment support, and language courses. For instance, Interviewee 1 highlighted the city of Stockholm's intent to share the responsibility of refugee integration with non-governmental organizations:

In the nineties, the city of Stockholm wanted another approach, so instead of social services that not all refugees but some refugees could have the introduction within the organisation, the civil society instead of the local social service authorities (Interviewee 1, March 2020).

The 1994 annual report also mentions coordination between SRC and some municipalities. As a result, the community members who met on a regular basis and exchanged experiences talked about what the municipalities should do (Svenska Röda Korset. Årsbok, 1994). Collaborations are noted to be mostly centered on education and information regarding social and refugee initiatives. To put it another way, the partnership groups concentrated on helping migrants integrate. One result of their collaboration with the municipalities was the provision of refugee guides to SRC. More precisely, as part of the Red Cross's "Communication Network" initiative, over 4,000 refugee guides were hired across Sweden in collaboration with local governments and other organizations (Svenska Röda Korset. Årsbok, 1994). The project's goal was to facilitate cross-cultural interaction between immigrants and locals in Sweden. In this way, steps were taken to facilitate the meeting of a Swedish family and the integration of refugees into Swedish society. Additionally, the 1994 Annual Report highlights that these partnerships—which were successful in addressing certain issues like job sharing, economic benefits, and the expansion of activities—were implemented through a variety of events held in the municipalities where each group was based (Svenska Röda Korset. Årsbok, 1994).

SRC's affiliation with Swedish authorities also extended to the management of reception centers. At the government's request, the organization operated four reception centers in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Haug-Gasser, 1993). Interviewee one noted that this arrangement lasted "only three or four years," highlighting its temporary nature. These centers provided refugees with support in securing employment and housing, as well as offering language education and health services while they awaited residency permits. Additionally, Brit Wikberg emphasized that the Swedish Red Cross was responsible for around 1,000 asylum seekers in these



camps, working to address potential challenges during their reintegration into Swedish society (Wikberg, 1989).

In collaboration with local and governmental agencies, SRC conducted a variety of initiatives that addressed important integrating domains such as housing, work, education, health, language, and culture. These efforts align with Agar and Strang's framework of core domains for refugee integration. Furthermore, the organization played a significant role in promoting 'citizenship and rights,' which Agar and Strang identify as foundational indicators for successful refugee integration, through various collaborative initiatives (Ager–Strang, 2008). SRC has actively monitored developments related to the refugee crisis, particularly in the context of political changes. A key focus of its refugee programs has been on political activities, especially following legislative changes such as the adoption of a new immigration law in 1997 and amendments to asylum laws (Svenska Röda Korset, 1997).

According to Elisabeth Abiri's study on Swedish refugee policy in the 1990s, the legislation introduced on January 1, 1997, brought significant changes to immigration practices, including revised procedures for family reunification, particularly for individuals separated from their nuclear families (Abiri, 2000). The scope of temporary protection was expanded under the new regulations, while the definition of close family—limited to parents and unmarried children under 18—was proposed for eligibility for residence permits. This effectively tightened immigration rules for extended family members (Abiri, 2000). The Swedish Red Cross's 1997 annual report highlights its initiatives addressing the impact of the new immigration law on family reunification and integration efforts.

Going a step further, SRC began a new partnership with other European Red Cross organizations in 1997 with the goal of bettering the lives of refugees and asylum seekers across Europe. The Swedish Red Cross was represented at the European Council against Racism and the Council for Ethical Equality and Integration, which aim to enhance the current social climate in these areas and offer suggestions for a new law designed to combat discrimination in the workplace. In doing so, SRC demonstrated its ability to oppose the government both independently and in conjunction with other agencies (Svenska Röda Korset, 1997).

SRC, which concentrated on studies of refugee policy in tandem with the new immigration law that was passed in 1997, kept up with rulings on foreign laws and took part in debates about the best way to organize asylum work in 1998. Furthermore, SRC organized a workshop with Caritas, Amnesty International, FARR, the Swedish Church, and the UNHCR at the 1998 Dublin Convention, which governed which EU countries are in charge of reviewing asylum applications to the EU. This event made the issue of asylum a major concern. In this manner, the issue caught the interest of government officials and other nonprofits (Svenska Röda Korset, 1998). SRC has actively influenced Sweden's refugee policies through various initiatives, including workshops, official statements, and advocacy. It has promoted refugee integration not only socially and economically but also politically. For instance, SRC



assisted refugees from countries like Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iraq, and Somalia in maintaining family connections, addressing challenges posed by the 1997 immigration law. In 1998, it processed 933 family reunification cases, forty-six of which involved unaccompanied children (Svenska Röda Korset, 1998).

Consequently, despite its auxiliary role with the government, SRC has taken a stand against the state and also criticized policies unfavorable to refugees, advocating for alignment with international human rights standards.

Evolving Partnerships: The Swedish Red Cross and State Collaboration in Refugee Integration Post-2015

The Swedish Red Cross is an independent organization (SRC Annual Report, 2017). To help more disadvantaged people, SRC collaborated with the Swedish authorities without hesitation in the 1990s. Actually, as this study has repeatedly stressed, there has always been a positive relationship between the Swedish government and the Red Cross (Lundström, 1995). Nevertheless, it has also evolved over the years. SRC has focused most of its national efforts on helping refugees who are coming to Sweden since the refugee crisis, according to the Annual Reports. Within this framework, SRC collaborates with government officials to provide humanitarian assistance on matters like treating tortured refugees, finding missing family members, and reuniting families, as well as implementing social integration programs (SRC Annual Report, 2016).

In 2015, the Swedish government allocated SEK 34 million to enhance humanitarian support for refugees. This funding enabled 5,700 volunteers to assist 120,000 newcomers across 132 municipalities in 2016 through activities such as language practice, homework help, theater, and sports. Similarly, efforts in key areas like asylum admission and resettlement continued into 2017, with additional government funding provided to support the integration of new arrivals. That year, over 52,000 people participated in activities organized in ninety-five municipalities (SRC Annual Report, 2017).

In the context of the aforementioned activities, SRC collaborates with the Swedish government in times of disaster, playing a complementary role. Furthermore, both the organization's publications and the opinions of interviewees usually highlight SRC's supportive role in its connection with the government. The following excerpt is taken from an interview with an SRC staff response to a question concerning this relationship:

We have seven fundamental principles and one of them is independence. So that means no government can influence what we do. So, we are nongovernmental. But we have an auxiliary role, which means that we support each other. We also think it is necessary to support the governmental authorities (Interviewee 2, March 2020).



The 2015 refugee resettlement has influenced not only health, social, and economic initiatives but also the nature of cooperation across these sectors. For instance, in response to the influx of refugees, a collaborative agreement was reached between SRC and the immigration office under the government's guidance. This agreement outlined that SRC would provide support whenever assistance was requested by the immigration office. Addressing the significance of this collaboration for the integration of newly arrived refugees, Interviewee 4 remarked:

The Swedish Red Cross has an agreement with the Migration Agency regarding cooperation in some key areas regarding migrants. This agreement has recently been modified, and our cooperation going forward is currently being developed. We have a continuous dialogue with both the Migration Agency and the government regarding the situation for migrants in Sweden. We also cooperate with some municipalities regarding integration and access to basic services [sic] (Interviewee 4, March 2020).

SRC and the government have a partnership that is founded on both national and international legislation. States have a duty to maintain family unity and bring together families that have been split apart by armed conflict under international humanitarian law (SRC Activity Report, 2016). The 1949 Geneva Conventions include the right to discover the fate of lost family members and the function of the Red Cross. Additionally, this treaty acknowledges that states have an obligation to work with the Red Cross to promote family reunion (SRC Annual Report, 2018). In this regard, it could be articulated that the Swedish government has a duty to work with the Red Cross.

In 2016, SRC voiced criticism against the Swedish government for aligning its refugee policy with the EU's restrictive approach. Specifically, the organization highlighted the Temporary Aliens Act of 2016 as a major factor contributing to the separation of many families and called on the government to eliminate these barriers to support family reunification for those affected by war or disaster (SRC Annual Report, 2016).

Furthermore, the restricted refugee policy has been characterized by interviewees as a barrier to the integration of refugees and asylum seekers, particularly those who have experienced torture and trauma. For instance, interviewee 2 clarified that:

The temporary residence permits came in 2016. Because it makes people very insecure. They do not know about their future and because it was also very difficult for families to reunite. You can never settle in the country if you do not know where your families are or how they are. You will never unpack your luggage in the hall. You will sit there and think you will never settle down. People will try. But if you do not know about your future, how can you then decide? You know, it is difficult if not. Why should you use a method if you do not even know if you can stay or not? Well, it is so difficult. And that is an obstacle to integration. It is a very big one. And



that is also what we have said about the temporary residency permits and the law saying that you cannot reunite with your family. Now you can. You know that there has been an opening (Interviewee 2, March 2020).

Regarding the effects of temporary immigration law, interviewee 3 states:

I think in 2016 the migration laws and in Sweden, which made you could have a permitted resident before, now you have temporary or three years or for 13 months. Depending on what status you have it is also very different to get your family here. It is so because there are demands on you have to be able to support your family. You have to have a big enough house. So that it makes the integration much harder for peoples when you are thinking about your children that maybe are in Syria or somewhere. It is not so easy to concentrate on language or integration. And also, if you have a one-year permit you have to seek again to make it longer and that may make you not insure and life is, of course, that is that makes it more difficult to integrate. That is the biggest difficulty for sure (Interviewee 3, March 2020).

As noted by Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 4, the Temporary Aliens Act has had negative effects on refugee integration, prompting SRC to advocate for refugee rights and maintain communication with the government through its special status. Annie Mohl pointed out that while some challenges remain, family reunification was made possible for those needing alternative protection after July 19, 2019. However, when comparing the consequences of the Temporary Aliens Act of 2016 to previous policies, it is evident that the right to family reunification and residency has become significantly more restricted. Following the implementation of the 2016 Act, the duration of permits and the right to family reunification now depend on an individual's protection status. For example, refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are granted temporary, not permanent, residence permits. Additionally, the category "others in need of protection" was abolished, and permits based on "particularly distressing circumstances" have been applied much less frequently than before (SRC Report, 2018).

Last but not least, SRC has actively helped people affected by finding employment and accommodation throughout the 1990s, despite the fact that their integration efforts were primarily conducted through social activities. The first interviewee stressed that they have been collaborating with the Stockholm municipality on newcomer orientation programs for many years. These days, however, only in exceptional circumstances does SRC work with the Swedish government to provide homes. Interviewee 4 describes how they are collaborating with the Swedish government to supply housing.

The Swedish Red Cross does work with housing for the most vulnerable, which often are refugees or other migrants. These housing solutions are provided in



collaboration with other organizations or municipalities. In Sweden, the Migration Agency offers housing for asylum seekers. Therefore, when we work with housing, it's usually not for people who are still asylum seekers. Many of our local branches provide housing for unaccompanied minors in collaboration with others. The most common are the coordination of voluntary family homes, but we also have corridor accommodations and apartment accommodations. In Stockholm, we also have the Red Cross House where we provide a place of rest during the day for anyone who needs it (Interviewee 4, March 2020).

The volunteer industry, especially in social services, has been greatly influenced by the Swedish welfare model. The need for voluntary services was first decreased by Sweden's sophisticated public welfare system, but this dynamic changed in the 1990s as the demand for voluntary services rose. Grassman and Svedberg point out that although nonprofits like the SRC can be essential in promoting awareness and aiding marginalized communities, they are unable to take the place of government-funded programs (Grassman–Svedberg, 1996). The refugee influx in 2015 further challenged the welfare state's capacity to carry out its core responsibilities. According to Hansen, the state's role changed over time, moving from actively providing welfare to supporting voluntary organizations financially (Hansen, 2018).

SRC has performed as a map, particularly in addressing areas where the state grappled with difficulties, such as assisting unaccompanied minors. Additionally, SRC increased its advocacy for refugee rights, particularly through initiatives like "Scrap the law. Not families." The group supported inclusive rights and opposed restrictive refugee policies, which is consistent with Bhattacharyya's participation principle, which places an emphasis on group meaning-making (Bhattacharyya, 1995).

Not just talking about it, but going out there, SRC strikes a balance between its advocacy work and a resolute dedication to affiliation with the Swedish government, local government, municipalities, and society. Its ability to oversee different crises and guarantee that vulnerable groups, like refugees, get the assistance they require depends on this partnership. The SRC acknowledges that collaboration with state and municipal authorities is essential for successful crisis response and integration initiatives, even though it occasionally questions government policy (SRC Activity Report, 2016).

Discussion and Conclusion

Examining studies that begin with the historical development of civil society in Sweden and look at its participation in the two main refugee crises (1990s and 2015), as well as its interaction with the state enabled to see the refugee issue from different angles. In the context of Adil Najam's (2000) theoretical framework and the refugee initiatives implemented in Sweden, the subsequent section will analyze



the relationship between civil society and the Swedish government following the refugee crises in the 1990s and 2015.

As noted earlier, the delivery of social services in Sweden is grounded in a framework of mutual trust between civil society and governmental institutions (Lundström, 1995). The involvement of voluntary organizations in refugee admission stems from the strong Scandinavian welfare model, which is underpinned by a deep-seated trust between citizens and the state. This model assumes that public authorities will fulfill their responsibilities, while civil society provides complementary support on both practical and humanitarian levels (Hansen, 2018). Consequently, the relationship between the Swedish Red Cross (SRC) and Swedish authorities in terms of integration initiatives has generally been collaborative and supportive. However, certain aspects of this relationship stand out when comparing the two periods of refugee resettlement.

Najam's (2000) Four-C's framework provides a useful lens to interpret these shifts. During the 1990s, the relationship between SRC and Swedish authorities largely aligned with *complementarity*. Municipal-level introduction programs provided the structural backbone of integration, while civil society—particularly the SRC—added value through international meeting centers, social activities, and humanitarian assistance. The goals of both actors coincided, and while their means differed, their efforts were mutually reinforcing. Housing was generally not a pressing issue in the 1990s, which reduced potential sources of friction between municipalities and NGOs.

In contrast, the 2015 refugee crisis introduced new strains to the relationship. Housing shortages and capacity challenges pushed municipalities and civil society actors into closer collaboration but also created tensions. The 2010 reform, which centralized responsibility for refugee integration, complicated this dynamic further. While the SRC continued to receive government funding for specific tasks—such as providing lodging for unaccompanied minors—its activities were shaped by shifting state policies, including the greater reliance on *temporary residence permits*. These changes reflect Najam's (2000) category of *cooperation*, since both sides shared the common goal of refugee integration, but civil society's work was increasingly conditioned by state priorities.

At the same time, elements of *confrontation* began to emerge, particularly as the Swedish government adopted more restrictive migration policies compared to the 1990s. While SRC never directly opposed the state, its advocacy role in highlighting refugee needs and inequalities reflects the tension that arises when humanitarian priorities clash with securitized migration policies. Still, unlike grassroots initiatives that openly contested state measures, the SRC mainly functioned as a mediator—what Diamond terms a “bridge”—by channeling societal expectations into dialogue with the state.

Turning to Najam's (2000) theoretical framework, the Four-C's Model defines “cooperation” as NGO-state relations can progress in a positive and cooperative manner when goals and means coincide and there is no perception of threat. For



instance, following the 2015 influx of refugees, as a result of an agreement with the government, a cooperative agreement was established with the immigration office on the situation of refugees in Sweden. It was understood in that agreement that the Swedish Red Cross would be ready to respond when the immigration office needed any help. In a discussion regarding the implications of collaboration between the state and the Swedish Red Cross in terms of newly arrived refugees' integration, interviewee A pointed out that:

The Swedish Red Cross has an agreement with the Migration Agency regarding cooperation in some key areas regarding migrants. This agreement has recently been modified, and our cooperation onwards is currently being developed. We have a continuous dialogue with both the Migration Agency and the government regarding the situation for migrants in Sweden. We also cooperate with some municipalities regarding integration and access to basic services [sic] (Interviewee A, March 2020).

On the other hand, the case of Refugees Welcome to Malmö can be interpreted as an example of both complementarity and confrontation within Najam's Four-C model. In the case of Refugees Welcome to Malmö, not only civil society volunteers but also state actors shared the goal of supporting arriving refugees, but they pursued this goal through different strategies—while the government relied on bureaucratic mechanisms, volunteers responded swiftly through grassroots, community-based action. For example, volunteers placed a high value on adaptable, needs-based, and humane aid that was founded on grassroots responsiveness and unity. The City of Malmö, on the other hand, removed civil society players from important roles after taking control by enforcing strict policies, such as prohibiting donated food in order to handle health risks (Frykman and Mäkelä, 2019).

Many volunteers became frustrated, angry, and eventually withdrew as a result of feeling replaced and undervalued. Such reactions align with Najam's confrontation category, where the tension between volunteers and police forces creates a breakdown in collaboration. Civil society actors no longer saw themselves as part of a cooperative effort but rather as being excluded, leading to a shift from engagement to resistance that is a hallmark of confrontation in Najam's framework.

Restrictive policies under the new law passed in 2016 are another context where the state's positive dialogue with civil society organizations has come to a dead end. In this vein, the Swedish parliament enacted a three-year temporary immigration law on June 21, 2016. Among other suggestions, the following are some of the modifications to migration policy that have been approved thus far: Minimum state subsidies for applicants who get legally binding rejections will no longer be provided, the deployment of law enforcement to expedite the removal of applicants who receive legally binding denials, using temporary residency permits, which are typically valid for 13 months, connecting family reunion and permanent residency permits with economic self-sufficiency (Dahlstedt and Neergaard, 2016: 132).



Civil initiatives have criticized the deportation of Afghan youth through the Facebook group "Stop the deportation of Afghan youth!" as a detrimental circumstance that affects the future and integration of Afghan youth, as Morell noted. According to Najam's Four-C model, the Facebook page "Stop the deportation of Afghan youth!" that Morell highlighted is therefore an obvious example of a confrontational relationship. The two actors' objectives and approaches were completely different. In keeping with its border control and migration policy, the Swedish government aimed to deport Afghan asylum claimants, who were frequently children or young adults. The goal of civil society actors, including the Facebook page's administrators and supporters, was to stop these deportations and advocate for a more compassionate, rights-based asylum policy. In more detail, while the Swedish state pursued formal legal processes, administrative decisions, and enforcement through police and immigration authorities, civil society engaged in public mobilization, social media campaigns, advocacy, and protest, attempting to shift public opinion and apply political pressure.

Taken together, when applying Najam's (2000) model, the 1990s period is best characterized by complementarity, where SRC activities complemented municipal initiatives within a welfare framework of trust. By 2015, however, the relationship shifted toward cooperation with occasional elements of confrontation, as political pressures and restrictive policy changes constrained the supportive partnership that had historically defined Swedish state–civil society relations.

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