



**The Swedish National  
Board for Youth Affairs**

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Summary of report 2002:2

# *Together*



# The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs

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is a governmental authority promoting young peoples' possibility to live independent lives, have real influence and be seen as resources in society. The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs is a governmental authority working within four activity fields.

We allocate public funds and work with method development within *Young Peoples' Leisure and Associative Activities*, as well as within *International Youth Exchanges*.

We support the development of *Local Youth Policies* and follow-up the *National Youth Policy*.

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# Preface

This is originally the opening chapter of the anthology "Tillsammans" ("Together"). The chapter is a summary of the conclusions drawn by the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs from four years of project work. "Tillsammans" also includes four other chapters, each introduced by an article written by one of the researchers that have been observing the project. Each researcher article is followed by interviews with project managers, working members of associations, teachers, and other people giving us their ideas of co-operation. Young people, who have been involved and engaged in different ways, are also represented. The interviews are separate from the researcher texts, but together they form a whole of theory and practice.

There are also a few sections in the book headlined "To be considered...". They can be used as check-lists when implementing a project or when organising activities for young people in risk environments. Experiences show that cross-sector co-operation might be difficult in the local administrations. Reaching agreements is time-consuming, decisions are put off, departmentalisation of responsibilities throws spanners into the work, resources are insufficient, some requiring more than others, and so on. At the same time, the project proves that a group of people can make changes and create new opportunities as soon as they have got properly started. They can reach further, and reach more people than they would have done on their own. The report is intended for anyone working with young people, and for those making the decisions on the lines of actions of these activities.

Leif Linde, General Director  
The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs

# Co-operation Project

## – finding methods for working with young people at risk

*Anders Kassman, Research Officer*

The Co-operation Project was initiated at a time when the conditions under which young people were living had changed. Youth unemployment was massive and economy measures were numerous. Since the 1970s, Sweden had been developing towards a more decentralised welfare state. Decisions affecting people in their everyday lives should be made as close to them as possible. In parallel with the project, the work with formulating the national youth policy has been proceeding. Three overall political objectives have been adopted by the Riksdag (the Swedish Parliament), and the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs is working for a cross-sector youth policy. The aim of the Co-operation Project was to see how different local participants could co-ordinate their work for young people in risk environments under those new conditions. It was considered important to make the most of the competence of different professional participants in this field, and to develop the project setting out from those working with youths every day of the week. With its starting-point in the new cross-sector youth po-

licy, the project aimed at supporting and stimulating youth participation. The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs established a promotion perspective, and aimed at bringing out good examples of well-functioning activities. The way of working was broadly similar to the one applied in the earlier Project for Local Development (the Plus Project) run by the Ministry of Public Administration a couple of years earlier. The two projects are similar in many ways but their contexts are different. The Plus Project was implemented in twelve suburban high-rise areas outside the big cities, whereas the Co-operation Project was intended for fifteen smaller town districts. Besides, depression and savings have made co-operation far more accepted in the local administrations today.

### **Promotion Perspective**

The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs is of the opinion that the activities within the Co-operation Project have been characterised by a promotion perspective. In research, the concepts of "Empowerment" and "Sense of

Coherence" (SOC) are the ones primarily used when discussing these activities.

### Empowerment

Bengt Starrin is a Swedish sociologist who has taken an interest in the concept of empowerment (Starrin 1997). He illustrates this concept by opposing it to what he calls the "paternalistic model". Characterising for the paternalistic model is that it is based on superiority and subordination. It is pre-

supposing that some experts, superiors, know what is best for others, subordinates, and that there is one solution only to various types of social problems. As an alternative to this traditional, controlling, stiff, and very lecturing model is the empowerment model which assumes that there is always more than one approach to social problems. This model emphasises everyone's equal value and the importance of standing side by side with vulnerable groups.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the paternalistic model and the empowerment model

<b>Paternalistic model</b>					
Type of relation	Participants	Actions	Ideal type	Sources of information	Terminology
People as masters and subjects; Superiority and subordination; Central, peripheral	Government; Local authorities; County Councils; Companies; Bureaucracies	Instructions; Inspection; Taking charge of; Control; Service; Order	The patriarch; The strict and almighty father; The good mother; The expert	Large-scale investigations; Conferences; Meetings	Emotionally neutral; Technical; Expert oriented; Formal; Creating order
<b>Empowerment model</b>					
People as citizens; Civil rights; I and You	New popular movements; Village communities; Co-operations; Self-help groups; Action groups	Mobilisation; Participation; Aid to helping oneself; Informal solutions; Civil disobedience	Enthusiast; "Teacher of the People"; Fixer; Lobbyist	Local studies; Personal experiences; Study circles; Dialog; Learning by doing	Both emotional and emotionally neutral; Connecting; Promoting participation; Creating self-reliance

Source: Starrin 1997 p. 17 and p. 21.

From this description, the empowerment model appears to be far more sympathetic and the obvious one to prefer, but it does have some apparent problems, and those problems tend to elucidate when talking of young people. Starrin describes the problems in the public health field. There, the classic, paternalistic model has proved to be the most successful one when dealing with the kind of ill-health which is directly related to the external environment, for instance health risks related to air, water, chemical and physical matters. It might be about efforts against smoking, alcohol and unhealthy eating habits. In those cases, the classic, paternalistic model seems to have a clearer task, and its role becomes even clearer when talking of children and youths. Many campaigns, for instance against smoking and the use of drugs, are directly aimed at young people, and there is a constant debate on the fact that children and young people do not get enough exercise and have bad eating habits. As the different models are described by Starrin, there is a clear contrast between on one hand wanting to exert an influence on people's behaviour in the fields known from experience to lead to a better life, and on the other an ambition to in a more unbiased way set out from the individual's own horizon.

Thus, the important question is how to pursue an empowerment inspired work. What the empowerment model might clearly promote is the idea of

carrying out the work closer to and in co-operation with the groups concerned.

### **Sense of Coherence (SOC)**

In his much discussed book, *Unraveling the Mystery of Health* (Antonovsky 1987), Aaron Antonovsky, a professor of medical sociology, develops his theory on how certain people can cope with the most dreadful situations and still stay healthy. He develops his line of argument on the concept of *Sense of Coherence* (SOC). Our sense of coherence composes of three factors; comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. A strong feeling of coherence developed during childhood might be the basis needed for coping with a difficult youth. People working with children and youths, as professionals or on a non-profit basis, have an important role to play since they can help strengthening the individual's sense of coherence in an active way. Stability and predictability make life more comprehensible, and as a result make it easier to manage the situation. If a young person feels that home life is rowdy and unsafe, stability and continuity on the outside become even more important. Consequently, a safe and stable environment in his or her spare time or at school becomes essential.

The Swedish National Institute of Public Health has published a document inspired by Antonovsky's thoughts and research done on children who do well despite a difficult childhood, asking



themselves how society might be developed in order to compensate for the difficult living conditions of vulnerable young people. The writers take four different safety factors as their starting-points (Hagström et al. 1998):

1. having the attention of, and having a mutual relationship to at least one adult outside the family
2. the development of good social networks
3. clear frames and a safe structure
4. the prospect of developing social and emotional competence

These safety factors are essential and can be influenced, and they contribute to an increased sense of coherence for

young people, which in turn promotes a positive development.

### **Purpose and Participants**

The purpose of the Co-operation Project was to test different co-operation models in the town districts, and to stimulate collaboration between various participants working with young people. In a number of districts, the Co-operation Project entered already established co-operational structures, where the ambition has been to develop those further. In some districts, that kind of advancement had not taken place. The idea was that the districts would learn from each other. This resulted in the project having different purport in the different town districts, as well as

for different participants within them. Those with collaboration forms in line with the new project were strengthened by the attention, whereas others with other collaboration forms or no collaboration at all, considered the project to be more pioneering. In districts that already had an established co-operation group, it proved difficult to develop it further by for instance accepting new participants. The Co-operation Project seems to have been most developing in districts that have a tradition of networking and have seen its advantages, but where the implementation of the project has not been assigned to co-operation groups that were already too strong and well established.

### Activities and Target Groups

The target group of the Co-operation Project was young people in different risk environments, for whom it is uncertain if anyone within the local administration has a clear responsibility. Social services have an obvious responsibility for many vulnerable young people. Even if not as explicitly, the local recreational activities are also often intended for young people with various problems. Most young people spend a great deal of their everyday lives in school, which is a reason why schools have been important co-operation participants. Lately, Sweden has also begun to pay attention to the importance of organisations and non-

profit participants in the preventive and promotive work. Young people as collaboration partners in the projecting of local activities and decision-making is emphasised in the national youth policy.

In the table on page 9, different blue-shades have been used to illustrate the approximate dispersion of the activities included in the Co-operation Project. The majority of them were intended for different risk categories. Some projects had a more general purpose. Other activities in the Co-operation Project were examples of support measures for those with more explicit problems. But no activities that could be placed in the boxes one, seven or nine have been taking place.



**Table 2.** Activities according to participants and target groups for co-operation

	All youths	Young people at risk	Young people with specific problems
Co-operation between local administrations	1. Traditional welfare policies. Often government regulated.	2. Identifying young people at risk.	3. Different forms of therapy, treatment or support programmes
Co-operation with organisations	4. Policies regarding leisure activities, local projecting of activities	5. Co-operation with particular activities	6. Relief organisations and enthusiasts. Non-profit motives.
Co-operation with private participants	7. Restoration of public areas.	8. Co-ordination of resources in specific fields	9. Private community homes

The different participants of the Co-operation Project are enumerated in the table rows, and the different target groups are enumerated in the table columns. In the boxes, you find different forms of activities that might be considered for co-operation between these participants and target groups.

The first box concerns different forms of general welfare policies, which are often Government regulated and were not considered for the Co-operation Project, but which still constitute an important basis for the other parts, for instance the Social Insurance system. In the second box of the first row, an important part of a local cross-sector youth policy is given. Co-operation makes it easier for different administrations to identify risk groups and young persons who are on the road to a problematic life. The third box concerns the co-operation between for instance

social services and school aimed at assisting or helping young people with explicit problems: They may be bullied, have problematic home conditions, or something of that kind.

The second row concerns co-operation between the local authorities and different organisations. Co-operation for a general target group between the local administration and organisations, youth councils or the like might for instance be about projecting and supporting a Youth Centre, or deciding where to make the investments in the sports field. There is a more directed co-operation with various organisations when concerning activities from experience known to attract young people at risk. The Co-operation Project in Gamla Uppsala between TeenWork and Uppsala Boxing Club, and in Östersund between the school Wargentinskolan's individual programme and the associ-

ations of Gamla Tingshuset, are examples of that kind of co-operation. Co-operation with organisations supporting young persons with an explicit problem behaviours, is exemplified by the co-operation with for instance various relief organisations that are often run by non-profit motives. They might for instance be religious organisations or client movements.

Co-operation with the private sector is to a large extent based on the prospect of convincing private business owners or their organisations that they have something to gain by the measures. There is often goodwill in different types of social reforming projects. In the Co-operation Project it has for instance been about instructing local night-watchmen in Båstad, or about financing a computer studio for Café Pax in Växjö.

### **Participants with Differing Interests**

Different participants have different motives for co-operating, and all participants must have something to gain by doing it. In society, there is a general ambition to prevent as many different types of problems as possible, as early as possible. At the same time, there is a growing awareness of the practical difficulties involved. The Government has been forced to savings, and has at the same time been working for an increased user influence. For private participants co-operating in their own interest, their main interests are often opposite those of the public. Organisations as well as private business owners

and others are interested in the well-functioning of the welfare state, at least at a basic level. At the same time, it is in the interest of some participants to keep the costs for the public low. The fact that their main interests point in different directions does not have to result in insuperable antagonisms between the different participants, but may even point to possible gains.

The co-operation has gained by the fact that different participants have been able to keep their specific professional skills, and come together to solve certain particular problems. In this form of co-operation, no participant has more influence than any other, so they all meet on the same terms. This requires a co-ordinator without a strong connection to any of the parties involved. An essential condition for this free role to function is that it has a clear authorisation from a quarter that is accepted by all the participants concerned.

In a number of cases, recreation leaders have proved to be good at carrying through the internal work towards increased co-operation. Recreation leaders are at the bottom of the local hierarchy, and have the least to lose on a reorganisation. They were often the ones responsible for the fresh ideas and the good spirits of the Co-operation Project, and the most clearly made common cause with young people. The other participants had a higher professional status and more often relied upon the expert knowledge of their profession.

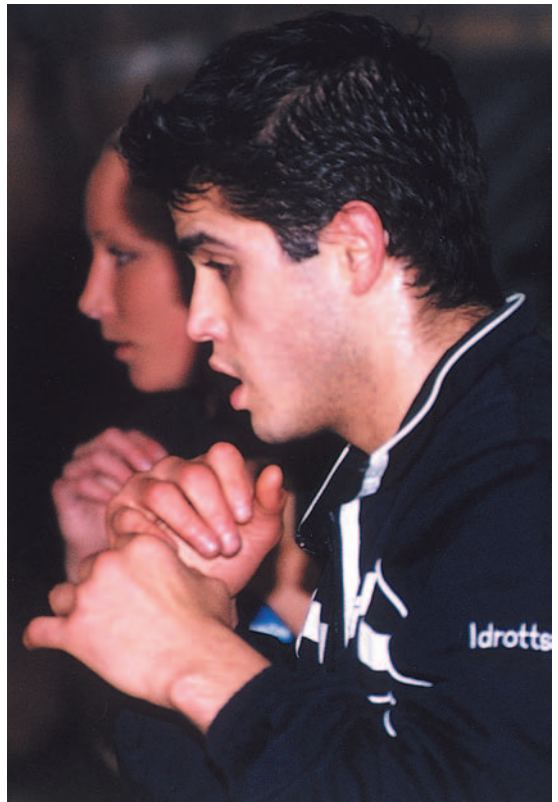
## Youth Influence

In the Co-operation Project, the idea was to increase the influence of young people. Above all, youth influence at four different levels was discussed. First of all, influence was taking place in the form of youth councils, parliaments or the like, dealing with the local projecting. In other cases, conferences or questionnaires have been used in order to learn the opinions of young people. Influence can also occur within the different activities or projects, in the form of youth participation in boards and committees. Finally, influence in the form of choices, i.e. that there are enough recreational activities available for young people to vote with their feet and simply take part in whatever activities suit them.

The idea of youth influence has grown stronger during the course of the project. The government bill regarding youth policy has been an important factor. This bill is often mentioned when discussing influence issues. The most convincing form of youth influence in the Co-operation Project has been within various forms of activities for young people at risk, as for instance in Växjö. Influence on local projecting has not been as successful.

The Co-operation Project puts a great responsibility on

the adults. They often know rather well what young people need, and they should act from this knowledge. It was the local project co-ordinator's task to maintain contact with the youth of the area; a contact close and good enough for him or her to be able to serve as their proxy in the co-operation with other participants. Naturally, this means a very limited youth influence on the projecting at large. But this approach takes into account the experiences showing that persons taking an active interest in the big issues, forming youth councils or other forms of influence forums, tend



to come from more well-to-do circumstances than the target group of the Co-operation Project. A clearer empowerment strategy is required in order for youth influence to increase within activities aimed at target groups living under more problematic conditions as well.

In the Co-ordination Project, there are promising examples of such activities. An essential part of these programmes is to make young people feel participant and committed to their own development.

Future projects should endeavour to find strategies for an even more expressed influence for different youth groups. In particular, they should aim at making groups traditionally not initiating project activities and the like of their own accord participate more in different activities.

One way to pay regard to the ideas of young people might be to ask them in a more systematic way which problems they experience in their everydaylives. In Hammarby-Råby, a worn central area in a part of Västerås participating in the Co-operation Project, an extensive work was carried out in order to learn the residents' opinions on the renewal of the area. As a result of this work of gaining support for the renewal, the original plans had to be changed and the centre was inaugurated later than planned for, in December 2001. The local project co-ordinator is of the opinion that the project conducted to an increased sense of participation amongst those

concerned. At the same time, there is a considerable risk to disappoint them since the possibilities of implementing the projects may fall short of their expectations. When planning to carry through a similar work, it is important to be prepared to act from the opinions that come to hand, as done in Västerås, otherwise the young people are done a disservice.



# Conclusions

*Make sure that no participant dominates the co-operation*

Co-operation is stimulated when all the participants can participate on the same terms. This requires an organisation that has the ability to look after the interests of the different parties concerned, and where all the parties can be united by activities that they consider to be in

line with their interests. The conditions of co-operation differ depending on the participants and the target groups concerned. The best conditions of co-operation are when the participants are standing a good chance of making obvious gains by co-operating. The local co-operation is strengthened by an independent youth co-ordinator with a central position in the local organisation, and without a strong connection to any particular administration.

*Do not take advantage of the enthusiasts*

In times of economy measures, there is a risk that we rely too much upon the devoted participation of individual citizens. These may be employees in various organisations, in the local authorities, or work on a non-profit basis. Their devotion and ideas deserve to be looked after, but there is a risk that they are worn out and that organisations built up around those people find it difficult to continue. Activities run by enthusiasts run the risk of becoming too dependent on one person; experiences and knowledge are not transferred to the organisation as a whole to a sufficiently large extent.



*Look into the needs of young people,  
and act from what you learn*

The Co-operation Project has proved that the youth policy may gain by making young people from different types of target groups more involved in the activities in which they are taking part. At the same time, the project shows that adults have a great responsibility when it comes to providing youths otherwise not listened to with the opportunities for expressing their needs. It is important to attend to the different problems that young people might experience in their everyday-lives, and to take actions in order to eliminate them. In several fields, we know rather well what the situation of young people looks like and what needs they have. In other cases, there is a lot to gain by making a clearer survey of their situation and their needs. The importance of also acting from the results that come to hand from those surveys cannot be emphasised enough. Carrying out such surveys is also helping to keep focus on the conditions of young people, and unnecessary work may be avoided.

*Make co-operation part of the work*

Local co-operation between different administrations may have a number of different aims. One important purpose is to avoid waste of resources in the form activities clashing in one way or another. Co-operation can also serve an important purpose in identifying young people at risk, young people who have problems in school, contacts with the

social services and perhaps even trouble with the police. For young persons with explicit problems or who are running the risk of developing problems, there is much to gain by co-operating to pro-mote a propitious development. How-ever, there has to be a clear purpose of the co-operation in order for it not to require too much time. Experiences show that co-operation is time-consuming. However, in those fields where the purpose is clearly framed, the Co-operation Project has proved that not a great deal of co-operation is necessary in order for good activities to be created.

*Arrange supporting activities  
for young people at risk*

The Co-operation Project has shown several examples of projects, which with rather simple means seem to be well-functioning and giving the participants badly needed support in their development. The experiences from Östersund, Växjö and other places show clear mutual similarities, and can be compared with the research done on children who do well despite a difficult childhood, and on Sense of Coherence (SOC). The National Institute of Public Health has published a list of four central safety factors as a useful guide for youth work (Hagström et al 1998). There are similar lists made from the experiences drawn from the Co-operation Project. Obviously, they provide simplifications, but are most useful when planning projects for vulnerable youths.



*Pay attention to research results*

There is a prevalent applied research that often produces relatively concrete results worth to be put into practice. In a report on the Co-operation Project involving the associations of Gamla Tingshuset and the school Wargentinskolan, Ola Nordlund summarises the international state of the art when it comes to elaborating treatment programmes for young people at risk. There is also applied research in other fields which have not been considered to the same extent by the Co-operation Project, e.g. research done on different leisure activities of young people, on marginalisation, and on particularly exposed geographic areas. Sometimes, research results may be hard to interpret for the practical work, and may not offer much useful guidance. However,

Nordlund has shown one way to put the research results into practice in his field.

*The activities should be attractive and just enough challenging*

The Co-operation Project shows that different youth activities have to be designed to attract different youth categories. It is important that young people participate on their own terms and find the activities to be just enough challenging. From the individual's horizon, it is important with a continuous development. However, the activities themselves do not need to be changed on a continuous basis. All they have to do is to create the space needed for the individuals to develop. Young persons grow and develop, but there is a constant flow of new ones who also need this space.

The Co-ordination Project has shown several examples where old industrial buildings have been reused for good youth activities<sup>1</sup>. An open attitude towards individual young persons and different youth groups is essential, and also to create sympathy for the wishes and approaches of other young people and adults.

#### *Good youth leaders are required*

The Co-operation Project puts a great responsibility for the development of young people on adults. The public has an even greater responsibility for young people with difficult home conditions. The personal characteristics of youth leaders are often emphasised as being central for supporting and stimulating the development of youths. However, the basis of these personal characteristics should be a professionalism which supports the leaders in their work. Professional youth leaders who know how to act in particularly difficult situations and have a strong support in their own adult identity are required.

#### *Let the young participants take part in the decision-making*

Rather simple matters are often of great importance in order to stimulate an increased participation of the young persons concerned. Just like adults, they want to take part in deciding the colour

of the youth centre walls. They want to decide where to go for outings, and what to put in their lunch packets. The Co-operation Project has shown that such issues are important for the development of young people's sense of democracy. However, this is not a reason to forget that young people who want to take part in more overall issues, for instance the local projecting, should also be allowed to do so. We are dealing with different types of youth influence, requiring a more open society at several different levels.

#### *Models for co-operation*

The aim of the Co-operation Project was to test and to develop different models for co-operation. The conclusion is that the models are as numerous as the activities. The central message is that an open attitude towards initiatives and ideas from below is more important than any particular organisational solution.

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1 In the Co-operation Project, there are also examples of cases where young people have been used just to fill up premises that nobody knew what else to do with. Obviously, this is nothing we wish to encourage.



# Literature

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# About the Co-operation Project

The Co-operation Projects were implemented 1997–2001 in 15 middle-sized town districts in Sweden. For the implementation of the project, the Government placed 30 million SEK from the State Inheritance Fund at the disposal of the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs. The Co-operation Project had a similar structure in all of the 15 participating town districts, with a local project co-ordinator and a control group appointed by the Municipal Executive Board. The project co-ordinator maintained contact with the project management at the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs, which was granting financial support for many widely differing activities in the districts. The purpose was that the support to the organisations, in combination with the local basic structure, would stimulate new forms of co-operation in the different districts. At the disbursement, the associations were requested to co-operate with the local control group and the project co-ordinator. All applications for financial support of different

youth projects went by the local co-operation group and co-ordinator to the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs. No projects were granted support without being well-established in the local co-operation group. The money was disbursed directly from the Swedish National Board for Youth

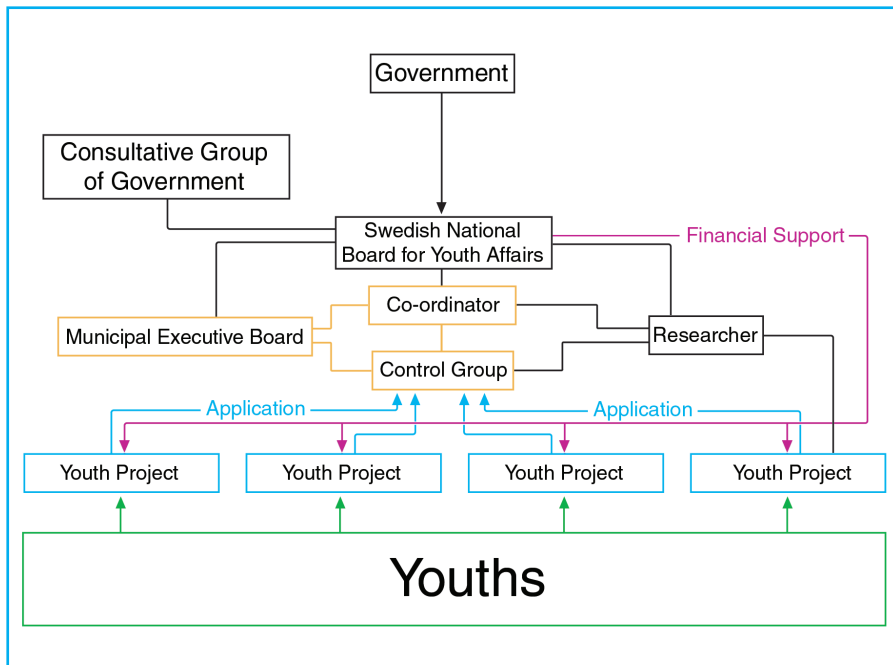
Affairs to the applying projects. Applications considered to be within the frames of the Co-operation Project were processed in dialog with the applying projects in order to refine their ideas without coming into conflict with the original ones. Nor did the project managers at the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs try to encourage anyone in particular to apply. No campaigns or the like

were carried out in order to encourage any particular type of project, or investments in any particular fields.

Nine researchers with different lines of research from different universities were contracted to observe the project. They were responsible for different districts, but also got together on a regular basis to discuss common issues.



**Figure 1.** The basic structure of the Co-operation Project



At the initial stage of the project, a co-operation agreement was signed between the Director General of the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs and the chairman of each Municipal Executive Board. At the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs, the continuous work was handled by the two project managers, who mainly maintained contact with the different local project co-ordinators. In some districts, this function was served by a specially employed person who did not have any other assignments but to co-ordinate the local co-operation, whereas the work in other districts was handled by an ad-

ministration manager from one of the co-operating administrations. All the districts had some sort of control group with representatives of the different co-operating administrations. The managers of the social welfare service, of school and educational issues, and of culture and recreation issues, constituted the heart of many of these control groups. Furthermore, in some cases there were also representatives of the police and the employment office, and in some districts youth councils or the like participated. In some cases, the control group consisted of political representatives of different committees.

The continuous contact with the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs was in all of the districts maintained by a project co-ordinator appointed by the control group.

### Fifteen Town Districts

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|--|--|
| 1. Båstad, pop. » 14 000*, Skåne län   | 9. Nynäshamn, pop. » 24 340*, Stockholms län       |
| 2. Finspång, pop. » 21 260*, Östergötlands län                                   | 10. Ronneby, pop. » 28 540*, Blekinge län          |
| 3. Gamla Uppsala, part of Uppsala town district, pop. » 22 000, Uppsala län      | 11. Staffanstorps, pop. » 20 140*, Skåne län       |
| 4. Hammarby Råby, part of Västerås town district, pop. » 6 000, Västmanlands län | 12. Söderköping, pop. » 13 920*, Östergötlands län |
| 5. Härnösand, pop. » 25 200*, Västernorrlands län                                | 13. Umeå, pop. » 104 900*, Västerbottens län       |
| 6. Hälaryda, pop. » 30 500*, Västra Götalands län                                | 14. Växjö, pop. » 74 110*, Kronobergs län          |
| 7. Kungsbacka, pop. » 65 950*, Hallands län                                      | 15. Östersund, pop. » 58 280*, Jämtlands län       |
| 8. Lindsberg, pop. » 23 500*, Örebro län   |  |

\* Source: Statistics Sweden, Population statistics 2001.



# Together...

...is originally the opening chapter of the anthology *Tillsammans (Together)*. The chapter is a summary of the conclusions drawn by the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs from four years of project work. The project proves that a group of people can make changes and create new opportunities as soon as they have got properly started. They can reach further, and reach more people than they would have done on their own. The report is intended for anyone working with young people, and for those making the decisions on the lines of actions of these activities.



**The Swedish National  
Board for Youth Affairs**

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