

Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning  
Studies in Adult, Popular and Higher Education no 5

Study Circles in Sweden  
An Overview with a Bibliography of  
International Literature

Staffan Larsson & Henrik Nordvall

Mimer –The Swedish National Programme for Research on Popular Education  
Linköping University Electronic Press

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Studies in Adult, Popular and Higher Education no 5  
(Studier av vuxenutbildning, folkbildning och högre utbildning, Nr. 5)  
ISSN: 1654-2010

URL: <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:liu:diva-57887>

Published by: Linköping University Electronic Press, Linköping, Sweden, 2010

## Foreword

In December 2008 we got a request from the South Korean authority National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE) to write a report on Swedish study circles and the system of state-subsidies. We full-filled this mission and our work was translated into Korean and published (see p. 54 in this volume). This request made us aware of the need for an easy accessible overview in English regarding the Swedish study circles; their history, the system of state-subsidies and their status as a mass-phenomenon in Sweden. We believe such an overview could be useful for an interested audience of non-Swedish-speaking adult educators, educational leaders and civil servants; as well as researchers and students in the educational sciences oriented towards adult education and civil society. That is why we have written this volume. To give guidance to readers who are interested in reading more about study circles we have made a bibliography of literature on the subject in other languages than Swedish.

We would like to thank our colleagues who have read our manuscript and given us valuable comments: Associate professor Lisbeth Eriksson, Associate professor Ann-Marie Laginder and PhD Martin Lundberg.

Staffan Larsson & Henrik Nordvall

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## Introduction

This text aims to give an overview of the study circles as a tradition and state of the art at present time. The point of departure is primarily the Swedish context, even though there are some comments about study circles elsewhere. This focus is justified by the fact that although study circles do appear worldwide, their status in Sweden as a mass phenomenon is rather unique and has attracted attention from outside observers<sup>1</sup>. Academic publications written in English about the Swedish study-circles do, however, exist, but only a few are recent. Drawing on results from empirical research done by Swedish researchers, as well as public statistics and evaluations, our ambition is to portray the study circles and their institutional context in Sweden.

First, there is a discussion about definitions, pointing out the lack of an exact notion of the study circle, but also suggesting an approximate answer – a study circle grammar. In order to provide a deeper understanding of the realities, there are also some very concrete examples, with respect to content and process. The idea is to communicate a richer and more down-to-earth meaning.

The same thought is applied to the second part, where participation and outcomes are presented. These are based on recent statistics, but also reports about the study circles from the participants' point of view - their experiences and understandings.

The administrative and economic support system is important for the operation of the study circles and consequently, it is described in a rather elaborate way in the third part. We think it will help readers to have some knowledge of this context for the Swedish study circles, which we think is different elsewhere.

Finally there is a bibliography of literature on study circles in Sweden and internationally. The ambition of the bibliography is to capture as much as possible, written in languages that can be read by an international audience. A number of useful web addresses are also included in order to provide easy access to important resources. The bibliography will hopefully be a tool for those who want to learn more.

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1 Oliver, L. P. (1987). *Study circles: Coming together for personal growth and social change*. Cabin John, MD: Seven Locks Press.

## ***Defining study circles***

Study circles are often thought only to exist in the Scandinavian countries, but they actually also exist in other countries. However, if one looks at statistics, we find huge participation figures in some countries like Sweden and Norway, where the notion of study circles is institutionalized through organizations (study associations), which promote, administer and report on the numbers of study circles and participants in order to receive financial support from the state (about 1/3 of their turnover). The number of participants in study circles organized by study associations is nowadays around 2 million, but the number of individuals is considerably less, since many participate in several. It is obviously a mass phenomenon in Sweden.

However, the pedagogy of study circles is also used quite informally or in educational institutions as part of more complex educational designs. For example, self-organized literature circles, where novels or poetry are read by the participants and discussed in the form of a study circle, are common.

What, then, is a study circle? Above, we wrote as if it has a single meaning. It is actually much more complicated. First: the meaning of a study circle has changed since the start. Second: the meaning of a study circle has been the object of conflicts many times during its history, i.e. debates about how it should be ideally or what kind of activities are not a study circle. It has even been looked upon as an impossible or false problem to define more precisely. The first leader of the Workers' Educational Association, Richard Sandler, wrote:

*"If someone tells you: 'This is exactly the way a study circle should look and this is the way it should work' - You must answer him right in the face: you are a humbug, sir, a genuine humbug, sir!"*<sup>2</sup>

Oscar Olsson is often referred to as the inventor of the study circle in its Swedish version and wrote a number of books, where he discussed what a study circle should be. He had the same attitude as Sandler, i.e. there is no place for an orthodoxy concerning the circles' content or form. It should be related to the circum-

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2 Sandler, R. (1937) *Mångfald eller enfald: tal och artiklar utg. till Arbetarnas Bildningsförbunds 25-årshögtid*. Stockholm: Tiden. Author's translation from Swedish: "Om det kommer någon och säger er: 'just så här ska en cirkel se ut, och just så skall den arbeta' - svara honom då mitt i ansiktet: you are a humbug, sir. En riktig äkta humbug, herre!"



stances and should change organically. He was ambitious in his views of the educated worker – he recommended literature and art as a suitable start, when persons from the working class engaged in a study-circle<sup>3</sup>. On the other side, he was also very pragmatic. If the participants wanted to meet around some topic, they could decide another topic for the next session, if it suited them. If they wanted to work for a year very systematic after a plan, it was also fine. They could study ordinary school subjects, if they thought they needed it and Olsson was very keen on having “university circles” lead by professors. When the masses should be responsible for the development of the society, Olsson argued, they must have sound knowledge in political and social issues and also in useful knowledge for the popular movements’ struggles, e.g., practical matters concerning the operation of organizations within popular movements<sup>4</sup>. There was one requirement that he had on all circles: it should be an informal conversation or deliberation, as it was between friends (which it often was). Olsson saw the natural and everyday talk as the cornerstone for the work in the circles, but the attitude to the issues should be more serious and deeper. Olson’s ideas are interesting, but they do not constitute any definition – as he and Sandler pointed out: it should change and adapt to a constantly changing society.

One side of the definition problem, and consequently with effects on the interpretation of statistical figures, is institutionalization – the study associations have a motive for using a very broad definition in order to receive economic support. One must keep this in mind when interpreting the official statistics, which is also the basis for what is reported here. One of the problems with a narrow definition is that it excludes what is common in the study associations, e.g. stressing conversation would exclude such activities, which are about learning to do handicraft, music and art. Stressing opinion making would exclude study-circles, which are focused on learning languages.

However, if it is not possible to say exactly what it is, one can at least give some indications. In the early period during the first part of the 20th century, it was understood as an activity where a group of people came together and chose a topic to

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3 Olsson, O. (1914) *Bildningssynpunkter*. Stockholm: Oscar Eklunds tryckeri.

4 Olsson, O. (1922) *Det svenska folkbildningsarbetet. En sammanfattning*. Stockholm: Oscar Eklunds tryckeri.

study. These persons always belonged to a popular movement, e.g. the Workers' or the Temperance movement. The notion of "self-education" has been used, indicating that it was education in the hands of democratically ruled organizations, rather than the state-controlled schooling<sup>5</sup>. Self-education therefore does not refer to individual or self-directed learning, but to the control of a collective: "not only for but also through the people". The practice also had some characteristics, which meant study circles deviates from normal pedagogy: Typically, around 10 persons gathered either in the popular movements' premises or at some participant's home. There was a broad range of topics. They could be content-related to the movements' interests, but also general knowledge such as economy or mathematics. One must remember that the participants at this time had a very limited education and were also in need of what falls within school subjects. The popular movements very much mobilized workers, farmers and the lower middle class, who had only attended elementary school. Before the school reforms after World War II, only a small section of the population had more than 7 years of schooling and many even less. This was also true of pupils, who were very successful in elementary school. Class rather than merit determined who could gain access to education after the elementary stage. Studies in ordinary school subjects were therefore of great interest. However, the perspective on what counted as content was much broader. Many topics were related to organizational work – how to chair democratic meetings or how to work with the economy of an association. In this early phase, one might see study circles as being part and parcel of the NGOs, which constituted the movements, i.e. they solved their needs for the upskilling of organizational skill by means of study circles. There was also a cultural agenda: literature and music were considered to be equally important in a vision of the educated worker or an educated people. There could also be books and songs, which mobilized for the cause of the movements, as they were selected from the general "canon". A library was often linked to the local branch of a popular movement during this phase. These movement-based libraries became an effective link between literature and workers, farmers and others who normally would not have any contact with books other

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5 Arvidson, L. (1989) *Popular Education and Educational Ideology*. In: Ball, S. J. & Larsson, S. (ed.): *The Struggle for Democratic Education*. London: The Falmer Press (p. 149-168), p. 149.

than religious texts at that time. A very large number of small libraries were spread over the country in this way. The gap between people with a short education and books with a secular content thus shrank. Another aspect of the context of study circles at its early phase was popular lectures, which were routinely delivered all over the country and often thought about as part of the same phenomenon as the study circles, i.e. as popular education.

The study circle tradition has changed a lot since that early phase: libraries became a concern for the municipalities and the movement-based libraries disappeared. Study circles used textbooks or books written especially for study circles rather than library books. Study circles are now formally linked to all kinds of organizations, i.e. not only related to classic movements. This means that all kinds of opinions or practices are represented, including people who were the enemies of the movements, e.g. conservatives or the former State church – until 2000 Sweden had a Lutheran church, which all citizens were born into, if they did not made an active effort to leave.<sup>6</sup> The Workers', the Temperance and the Free-church movement were very strong a century ago – activities were intensive and many took part. Parties, unions, churches and similar organizations constituting the civil society began to suffer from the attraction of other kinds of entertainments etc. Already more than 50 years ago one can read complaints about an erosion of the interest of actively taking part of the movements' local work<sup>7</sup>. However, the study-circles did not suffered from this – the participation figures instead increased rapidly and steadily during the post-second world war period, until the end of the 1970ies, when it reached a peak and then stayed approximately at this high level. The peak was due to a temporarily revival of the secular civil society, e.g. the Workers' movement, but also the Women's and the Environmental movement and also a vigorous new left, which was celebrating civil society activities like study circles. Another contribution to the high participation figures in the end of the 1970ies was the generous economic conditions for study circles, which was the effect of the implementation of new policies for adult education and culture. In both cases was equality the explicit purpose for the reforms. After the peak in 1970ies, participa-

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6 The other Nordic countries, England, Iran, Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia and a few other still have this construction of not separating religion from the state.

7 Johansson, H. (1954) *Folkrörelserna*. Stockholm: Ehlins, Folkbildningsförlaget.

tion did not fall back, but rather stayed at approximately the same level until we reach present time. However, the activities in the movements and the civil society have dropped and it is often discussed as a crisis for democracy. The study associations has survived by developing a complement to the relation movements' and organizations' activities, where they recruit participants outside the organizations through advertising or similar means.

The movement or organization-based study circle is still very common, it actually constitutes 26 % of all, but 29% of the study-circles nowadays recruit participants through advertising or via study associations' websites<sup>8</sup>.

Many participants nowadays do not belong to any of the organizations behind the study-circle associations. The advertised study circles are also different in that they bring together individuals, who often do not know each other. What these participants share is their interest in the topic rather than an organization. Participants in these normally pay a course-fee - only 16 % participate in circles, which are free of charge. If one look at the study circles in total: 46 % are free of charge, i.e. it is normally these, which are recruited by friends or through organizations, where participants do not pay. These kinds of study circles have compensated for the drop in participation in movements or organizations, which has been a fact for a long time. A rather elaborate administration was developed in the second half of the 20th century parallel to a strong period of expansion in numbers of participants: it was ten times more in 1980 than in 1950. One might also say that the study associations have become more business-oriented now in the early 21st century for various reasons. One is the consequences of New Public Management, where companies, affiliated to the study associations, are competing for sub-contracts for formal education, which are offered in a market for providers.

Another aspect of the definition question has to do with the efforts to divide activities, which are defined as study circles and the other business. One might say that official study circles are defined, when it is reported by the study associations, based on forms filled in by leaders about participants' presence, etc. In recent decades, we have also seen how the study associations have become increasingly

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8 All figures from Andersson, E., Larsson, M., Lindgren, L. (2009) *Studiecirkeldeltagare 2008. En studie i studieförbundens studiecirkelverksamhet*. Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet. It is based on a survey to 10 800 participants.

business-oriented. In order to be eligible for support from the state, these activities must be separated from the business activities, although this does not prevent study-circle leaders to be involved in activities on both “sides”.

### ***The study circle “grammar”***

Since the study circles were developed within the contexts of democratically run organisations, it is understandable that some of the democratic ideals spilled over into the study circles. Teachers were often not available, but were not thought of as being necessary for the educational process – a conversation between the participants was instead seen as a tool. Instead of the notion of a teacher, there was a leader who organized the dialogue and whose suitability was not necessarily based on having more knowledge than other participants. The equality between participants is still emphasized. However, nowadays many study circle leaders work as paid staff and regular teachers are sometimes hired as leaders. As we can see from these examples, in spite of the lack of an exact definition, there are traits in the study circles that make them different from what is often typical in regular schools. We can even talk about these differences as a “grammar”, borrowing from two researchers in educational history: according to Tyack and Tobin, schools are characterised by a common “grammar of schooling” – a general structure that they share<sup>9</sup>. Central dimensions in this grammar of schooling are a limited number of subjects in the syllabus, the compartmentalization of knowledge in pieces, “homework” and furthermore the division of time into pieces – lessons. Other aspects are tests, exams and the unequal relation between students and teachers.

We might use this metaphor of a grammar and instead of a grammar of schooling when trying to discern a “study circle grammar”<sup>10</sup>. The following picture would emerge of contemporary study circles as an ideal type:

1. Participation is voluntary. Since it normally is based on an interest in a chosen topic, there is often a personal commitment to the study activity.
2. There is typically open access to study circles – one does not have to have any entrance qualifications to participate.

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9 Tyack, D., Tobin, W. (1994) The “Grammar” of Schooling: Why Has it Been so Hard to Change? *American Educational Research Journal* 31,(3):453-479.

10 Larsson, S. (1995) Folkbildningsbegreppet ur en vuxenpedagogisk synvinkel. In: Bergstedt, B., Larsson, S.(red) *Folkbildningens innebörder*. Linköping: MIMER: Skapande vetande.

3. Persons of different ages are mixed in the circles. Statistics from Sweden show relatively even rates of participation in different age groups. For the older half (50+) of the adult population, study circles are almost the only available alternative, since other forms of adult education focus on younger adults.
4. Some study circles are organized by the participants, i.e. they choose topic, leader, etc. Here, the theme of equality and democracy is pronounced, but often this theme is less radical. However, many study circles are initiated and organized by functionaries in study associations.
5. There are typically no examinations to be taken and formal merits to be gained. However, exceptions do exist. This can be viewed as a key to understanding the experiences participants have. They do not participate out of an instrumental interest in merits, but rather because of a personal interest in the topic.
6. A limited number of persons in a circle expect to gain merits, normally somewhere between 5 - 10 persons. This certainly provides scope for a higher level of active participation than in ordinary classes. It is also the basis of commonly expressed social qualities, such as a feeling of togetherness. Study circles can also function as important social arenas where these qualities are otherwise scarce, as in the countryside.
7. Study circles often meet 3 hours once a week with a break in the middle. A study circle normally includes 10 to 15 such meetings. Study circles are often an evening activity, which makes it possible to participate after work. However, there are many exceptions here. Many retired persons participate during daytime and some study circles can meet a few numbers of times.
8. As has already been mentioned, a circle can be led by a leader, who does not have to be an expert – in fact it may be one of the participants. On the other hand, experts often act as leaders.
9. Participants should have an equal share of the conversation. This ideal is difficult to achieve, especially when the leader is an expert. The atmosphere should be informal, which is very often the case. However, many study circles are not focused on conversations, but rather on learning by doing, e.g. a handicraft. In these cases, participation can be fairly individualistic, i.e. being together, but doing your own thing.
10. There are very broad frameworks for what can be the content of studies. No national curriculum exists and the topics actually cover a very wide spectrum. Typically, school subjects are rare, apart from languages. The lack of restrictions in content has meant that study circles have been very responsive to varying needs. In this sense, the study circle tradition is very different from formal education, which on the whole is very restricted as regards what counts as content.
11. Study circles can be linked to various political, religious and social interests and perspectives. In this way they are arenas for culturing diversity. This also

means that study circles are very suitable for civil society. The study associations, which are the organisers of most study circles, actually have strong links to almost all organisations in civil society.

In the presentation so far, the focus has been on the study circles, which are organised by study associations. There are also study circles that are self-organised outside the study associations. Discussing literature – prose or poetry – in "reading circles" is an example of such a practice.

A debate, which seems to be never-ending, is about the wide span of activities offered by the study associations under the formal name of a study circle. Some people are skeptical of circles that focus on culture, handicraft or music, while others think that content should be related to knowledge that makes people better equipped to form opinions about political issues. However, these arguments have had little success in reducing the multitude of topics organised by the study associations. The names of some of the study circles, which participants in an interview study took part in, illustrate this diversity.<sup>11</sup> The circles had names such as: English language, Music, Interpreting the Bible, Building a musical instrument, Weaving, Fishing, On the way to the future, Computers, Circle for relatives of persons with dementia, Writing, Baby-song, Summer in the fields, Japanese sewing, My farm in the European Union, Minerals in Sweden, "Sing, Swedish people", Gardening, Cooking, "Bergsmansgårdens Lina" – a literature circle, Medieval songs and dances, Your dog, Healthier sports, English for beginners, Referee - circle (soccer), Singing in a choir, Ceramics, Circle for people with dementia in a service-home, Weaving ribbons, German language, The community and the environment, With your own strength, Matters of influence for the retired, Water colours, Rock music and, finally, Conversations about life.

Judging from these assorted names, it is obvious that content is very diverse. They even create an anarchistic impression, which is not completely wrong. One consequence is related to the pedagogy; in many cases, the participants doing something rather than just talking.

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11 Andersson, E., Laginder, A.-M., Larsson, S. and Sundgren, G. (1996) *Cirkelsamhället - Studiecirkelars betydelse för individ och lokalsamhälle*. SoU 1996:47. Stockholm: Utbildningsdepartementet.

According to statistics from the Swedish Adult Education Council, the aesthetic subject area of art, music and media is the most common content of Swedish study circles, covering 60 per cent of all circle activities. Most of these study circles are related to music, theatre and dance. Studies in the area of the humanities (languages, history etc) accounted for approximately 14 per cent of the study circles, and social and behavioural science accounts for 6 per cent. Other subject areas with considerable participation is Personal services (which covers cooking, tourism, travel, preventative healthcare, sports, consumer science, etc.) and agriculture, gardening, forestry and fishing.<sup>12</sup>

### ***A concrete example of study circle activity***

The researcher Hartman gives us a concrete picture of a contemporary circle<sup>13</sup>: it will provide a basis for the readers' conception of the existing study circles. This circle is an example of circles that are organised by a local folklore society and do not have an expert leader. It is run by the "local history association" in a rural community. Hartman finds the participants in the local library:

*"In the circle this evening there are 8 participants, the leader included. They have all lived in Björkvik for a long time and range from middle-aged to old. The members have been the same in the last few years. There is an open and informal structure where participants own initiatives and propositions play an important role. They have been writing a diary since 1988 and this time they start by reading aloud the text from the previous meeting. We understand that they have focused on the diary in recent years. One of the female participants starts by showing a new newspaper article about a project for the unemployed. This project is related to a railway line that was built to transport timber from Björkvik to the coast at the beginning of this century. The aim was to save timber from the attacks of larvae. Today, there is only part of the old railway embankment left. In the informal conversation, which was typical of the way the circle operated, they discussed the possibility of using the remaining part of the embankment for tourists. A sketch for a*

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12 Folkbildningsrådet (2008) *Årsredovisning med verksamhetsberättelse 2007*. Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet.

13 Hartman, P. (1996). *Studier i förening: några medlemmars tankar om demokrati och cirkelstudier i folkrörelser*. Linköping: Institutionen för pedagogik och psykologi, Linköping university.



*trail for bikes starting or ending in Björkvik was made as a way of leading the flow of tourists to Björkvik.*

*Another spontaneous input was a finding from one of the participants's farm. It was a page from the local telephone directory from the 1930s. A number of images from the interwar period were presented. One of the participants said that he had a directory from the time of the last war at home. He promised to fetch it in the break since he had to drive his son from his sport activities. Eventually the circle returned to the theme of the local dairies. With the help of dictionaries from the library they found out about the origin of the concept dairy and its way into the Swedish language. There was a break for coffee brought by the participants. Finally, the local play about the interrogations by the church in the old days was discussed. This play was going to be a part of the arrangements this summer on the annual "returners' day", when old inhabitants meet in their old community. The participants' knowledge of each other was a prominent part of the work in the circle. This means that participants were aware of each other's special interests and special knowledge. Questions were often answered by the "specialist" simply by virtue of the fact that the others turned towards him or her. The leader of the circle kept a low profile and did not speak a lot. The informal traits of work in the circle were obvious. At 9.30 it is time to break up."*

This quotation illustrates just one circle, with its idiosyncrasies, but it gives us some idea about what it could be like. It becomes clear that in this case, it is different from many classroom activities.

## Outcomes

It is obviously difficult to pinpoint the outcomes of study circle participation in many important respects. One problem is finding a valid way of measuring the impact such as the contribution to democratic life, since such criteria are rather general. Another difficulty is related to the fact that a study circle normally comprises 30 - 40 hours in all, i.e. a rather small input. The picture of the outcomes is therefore not complete; rather, light has been shed on some aspects. There are some figures from statistics and some results from interviews with participants.

### *Statistics*

The first study association, created in 1912, was the ABF, linked to the workers movement. 57 study circles were registered in its the first year<sup>14</sup>. Over the years, new associations have been created, all linked to popular movements or other organizations in civil society. Thus, study associations were started up to serve the temperance movement, Free Church movement, and movements linked to farmers as well as white-collar workers. Also liberal and conservative forces formed study associations, and there is a study association linked to the university extension movement. Finally, there was a study association linked to what was the State church until 2000. This last association created is related to the faith of Islam. It can be noted that these study associations cover a broad range of sectors in civil society. The Workers' Educational Association organizes most study circles.

Another side of the study circle's position in society is participation. Since the start, the number of participants grew steadily and peaked at the end of the 1970s. The number of participants has since remained close to this peak level, i.e. around 300,000 study circles have been reported each year. The numbers have declined somewhat in recent years for various reasons, some of them organizational changes and some possibly related to a less generous delimitation of the definition of a study circle. 275 000 study circles with 1.9 million participants were reported in 2008. 58% of the participants were women and 42% men. 9.8 million study hours were reported that same year, which means that each participant spent 36 hours on

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14 Arvidson, L. (1996) *Cirklar i rörelse*. Mimers småskriftserie nr 1. Linköping: Mimer.

average in a study circle<sup>15</sup>. This is roughly similar to the idea of a study circle, which meets 10 times for a 3-hour session. There are fluctuations, but there have been around 300,000 study circles since the late 1970s. If we instead go back 60 years, we can see that there was a dramatic increase in participation: In the middle of the 20th century, the number of study circles was only a tenth of what it is today: there were less than 31,000 study circles with some 315,000 participants in 1950/51<sup>16</sup>. There is little reason for nostalgia in this respect – participation was low in the old days. There has been a shift in the content areas that dominate, i.e. a considerable increase in the aesthetic sector - music, art, handicraft, although it should be remembered that the same sector was also dominant 60 years ago.

Since the same person can participate in several study circles, the number of persons participating in one or more study circles during a year in Sweden is much lower: recent figures for 2008 report 750,000<sup>17</sup>. The figures are considerably lower than for earlier years, which is due to several factors: 1. There is a real drop in participation recent years. 2. Study circles related to sports activities are excluded. 3. Much better raw data – for the first time, unique individuals are included in the statistics. Earlier estimates varied between 1.2 and 1.6 million, out of a population of close to 9 million, which is a considerable proportion<sup>18, 19</sup>.

Another now somewhat old figure, which was based on a survey of the participation and non-participation in various forms of adult education is that 75% of the adult population has participated at least once in a study circle. Another finding was that 10% of the population saw study circles as a regular part of their life and it is reported that for half of them, study circle participation is a life style<sup>20</sup>.

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15 Folkbildningsrådet (2008) *Årsredovisning med verksamhetsberättelse 2007*. Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet.

16 Figures for 1950/51: Johansson, H. (1954) *Folkrörelserna*. Stockholm: Ehrlins, Folkbildningsförlaget, s. 239.

17 Figures for 2008. <http://www.folkbildning.se/page/423/statistik.htm> : downloaded 20091016

18 Byström, J. & Säfström, F. (2006). *Studiecirkeldeltagare 2004: två rapporter om deltagare i studieförbundens cirkelverksamhet*. Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet.

19 Jonsson, J. O. and Gähler, M. (1995) *Folkbildning och vuxenstudier. Rekrytering, omfattning, erfarenheter*. SoU 1995:141. Stockholm: Utbildningsdepartementet, Also: Svensson, A. (1996) *Vilka deltar i studiecirklar? II. Rapport från en undersökning av deltagare i studieförbundens cirkelverksamhet hösten 1995*. Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet.

20 Jonsson, J. O. och Gähler, M. (1995) *Folkbildning och vuxenstudier. Rekrytering, omfattning, erfarenheter*. SoU 1995:141. Stockholm: Utbildningsdepartementet.

Several investigations have been done, based on large representative samples on the operation and participation patterns. The most recent were done by Andersson, Larson and Lindgren, report about 2008 participants. Women have since long constituted the majority – they are now 60 % of the participants<sup>21</sup>. The older population is somewhat overrepresented – they also contribute to a relatively high proportion of participants with short educational background. Of the participants older than 65 close to 40 % never entered upper secondary school, while the comparable figure is 8% for those between 25 - 44 years old. The proportion of 65 + participants has gone up the last decades – 10% between 1992 and 2008. Younger participants have more education. The majority is actually not in work – only 42 % were working. This is due to a high proportion of retired persons – 37%. 12 % were students – also young persons are participating.<sup>22</sup>

From the Andersson et al. report about 2008, there are some indications about the experience of the value of participating. 49 % think they have enhanced their knowledge and skills “a lot” and 45 % “to some extent”. Most use what they learnt in private life (36%), while 20 % report that associations and similar organizations were the context of use. Many report about personal growth as an outcome of participating. Somewhat more than 60 % think they have felt an increasing well-being and comfort. Around 40 % feel stronger as a person, better on expressing themselves, co-operate and make better decisions. The social aspect of participation is still very much appreciated by participants. It has strengthened the cohesion within the group, when participants knew each other before – 49% reported this. On the other hand, 61 % had met new people and 27 % had got new friends, which they also had met outside of the study circle. A high proportion has been inspired to continue to study – 65 %.<sup>23</sup>

Most study circles are related to cultural activities in various forms, e.g. handicraft, but also music and art. In most of these study circles, participants do not read about these forms of culture; instead, they paint, sing and make cultural artifacts. In this respect, study circles play an important role in actively involving a significant proportion of the population in culture as amateurs. There is also interplay be-

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21 Andersson et al (2009) All figures from their report on participants 2008.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

tween amateurs and professionally trained artists and musicians, where the latter often earn their daily bread as study circle leaders in such circles. One might also suspect, that the interest in professional culture is nurtured by being an active amateur. A new cultural policy was formulated in the 1970s. Earlier visions where culture should be brought to the people, were developed with a focus on democratic, broad cultural involvement, not only as audience, but also in doing culture. Similar policies were formulated in the other Nordic countries. This cultural policy also gave study circles an obvious meaning in this context, not only in relation to educational policies. Recent surveys, comparing EU countries, seem to support the effectiveness of these policies: Swedes are the most culturally active in Europe, followed by Danes and Finns.<sup>24</sup> Not least, they are involved in active cultural production or performances.

### ***Participants' view of the meaning of participating***

In an empirical investigation, "The Circle Society", 63 participants were interviewed in order to understand how they understood the meaning of participation<sup>25</sup>. Each interview was interpreted qualitatively and a "portrait" of the interviewed participant was made. The general framework was to investigate the relation between everyday life and study circle participation. The result was a description of the variation in meanings that the circles had for the participants. This variation was very wide as it often showed complex relations between participants' life situations and the reasons they reported for participating in a study circle. It turned out to be much more complex than the views represented in policy texts about study circles. Instead, the multiplicities of meanings form a general pattern. Participants seem to use study circles to meet their needs in a creative way. This was the pattern that emerged when we described the variation in all the interviews – the outcome space contained 44 different kinds of meanings that could be sorted into 6 meta-categories:

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24 Ruth, A. (2003) *Den Nordiska femklöver*. Copenhagen: Nordiska Kulturfonden, p. 21.

25 Andersson, E., Laginder, A.-M., Larsson, S. and Sundgren, G. (1996) *Cirkelsamhället - Studiecirkelars betydelse för individ och lokalsamhälle*. SoU 1996:47. Stockholm: Utbildningsdepartementet.

1. Develop an interest. The reason for choosing to join a study circle is in most cases a genuine interest – genuine, not strategic, in relation to a system. 2. Learn. Many participants want to be able to understand what is happening in the world, while others want to develop their hobbies. It could also involve learning for work as in the case of farmers or learning a language as a preparation for formal training in that language. Here, it is obvious that what is most important is the use value and not exchange values that are important. However, there are examples of an indirect relation to systems' rationality, as in the cases where the knowledge acquired can be significant in work or later formal training. 3. Fellowship. This social function is very important and is mentioned by all the participants who were interviewed. It is clear that social relations are viewed in terms of co-operation rather than competition. These first three meta-categories were mentioned by the majority of the interviewed participants. However, there were a further three meta-categories that were not so frequently mentioned: 4. To develop as a person. Some participants boost their self-esteem in the study circles. This is also a sign of the experience of support, rather than suppression or competition. 5. The value of the study circle as a democratic forum. Some participants stress the opportunity to learn to express one's opinions and to take part in a debate. Another value lies in the study circle as a forum for forming opinions and preparing political action. 6. The form of study. Some participants underline the importance of the freedom to choose and the lack of examinations. Some of them also mention the informality of the interaction as an important value. In this category, the framework that divides study circles from schools are highlighted.

Furthermore, the study found that participation normally played several roles, even at the individual level. For instance, for one participant, study circles could be both a meeting-place to break away from isolation and a way of learning something that was in that person's genuine interest. Thus, broad variation was the general pattern. The great variation, even in the case of a single individual was a very striking result. An example based on an interview with a participant can give an idea about how this multiplicity of meanings is described in a concrete case:

The participant is a Finnish immigrant – we can call him Juhani<sup>26</sup>. He came to Sweden at the beginning of the 70s. Now he is an unemployed carpenter in his 50s. He spends his free time at the Finnish cultural club "Finngoths." Mostly, he is active in the motor sports and music sections. Music is as important as motor sports:

*"He has participated in several study circles related to music, one about classical music and one about playing the "mandolin". He also sings in the choir and has sung in several folk music festivals in the country. The choir is also organised as a circle. Now, Juhani is participating in a handicraft circle where they are making a "cantele", which is a traditional instrument from Carelia. The circle is arranged by "Finngoths" in co-operation with ABF (WEA). There are 10 participants, both men and women, who meet once a week. Juhani has several different instruments at home and this is not the first time he has made a cantele in a study circle. Earlier, he made an instrument with 5 strings. Now he is making a 10-stringed cantele. "I wanted to show the Finns that ordinary carpenters can do this kind of very delicate carpentry. And I did do that in fact, I made one such small instrument in two evenings and that is very fast, he says. It is the fine carpentry, the soft wood and the unusual ways of putting the pieces together that is the challenge, he explains."*

But it is not for the handicraft as such that he participates, it is because of the fellowship in the th Finngoth club. A couple of years ago, he became unemployed, which was a new and terrible experience. He spent almost all his time in front of the TV. He thinks that the risk is great that unemployment leads to marginalisation and that it is very important that one has something meaningful to do. The circle and the activities in the club have a new meaning for him since he lost his job. In the circle, he can relax and forget the troubles of everyday life. At the same time, he meets other people in the same situation who share his interest. Several participants in the circle are unemployed.

A more elaborated interpretation was made, where the focus was on understanding the meaning the participation in the circles had in relation to two aspects: the life situation of the individual and the circles as part of society.

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26 The description is based on Andersson, Laginder, Larsson & Sundgren (1996) pp 47–50.

For Juhani, the circle was an opportunity to develop his musical interest. It was also a part of reproducing the Finnish culture – a part of an elaborated system of self-governed activity within the Finnish community. Another significant meaning was the fact that the construction of a cantele was a challenge in terms of vocational skill, since our participant was a construction worker, who had never worked with such delicate objects as a music instrument. Furthermore, he was unemployed and by attending the course could maintain and develop his skills and his pride in vocational skills – an identity-supporting aspect. Finally, he pointed out that it was important for him and for others to be able to participate in an organized activity when unemployed, since it structured life to some extent and prevented passivity. Thus, in this last respect, the study circle acted as a disciplining force: as the Finnish community's self-disciplining activity.<sup>27</sup>

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27 Ambjörnsson (1988) has elaborated this theme in popular education based on Elias' historical analyses of morality. Ambjörnsson, R. (1988). *Den skötsamme arbetaren: idéer och ideal i ett norrländskt sågverkssamhälle 1880-1930*. Stockholm: Carlsson.



## **Economy and administration**

Study circles are “institutionalized”, i.e. most of them are not organized spontaneously, but within an administrative and economic support system. One might assume that the existence of this system has promoted long-term success in terms of quantity of study circle activity in Sweden.

### ***Public subsidies to study circles***

Ever since the early 1900s, study circle activities have been financially supported by the Swedish authorities, at both the national and local level. Since 1947, these subsidies have made up a considerable share of the study association’s economy. The arrangements for these subsidies have varied over time. The different forms of subsidies have not only enabled the existing activities to continue but have also contributed to the development of study circle activities and how they are organized. The regulations governing the subsidies have also influenced what could be studied, who should be prioritized as a participant and the process, but on the whole these regulations have been not been restrictive. The number of study circles has undoubtedly been influenced by the subsidies. For example, although ABF is an initiative of the labor movement, the formation of a specific study association in the labor movement in 1912 should be understood as an effect of the introduction of state subsidies for study activities that same year. Public support for study circle activities has influenced the organization of study activities in civil society at the same time as organizations in civil society have influenced the development of public support.<sup>28</sup>

Today, state subsidies for popular education, i.e. for study associations organising study circles and folk high schools, amount to approximately 325million EURO<sup>29</sup> on an annual basis. 165 million EURO of this amount goes to study circles, while the remainder supports the 148 folk high schools. These subsidies are moti-

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28 This dialectics could be regarded in relation to the Swedish state tradition of involving several interest groups (trade unions, employers’ organizations, etc.) in public administration. The model is often referred to as the “Swedish corporate state”. Ch. Rothstein, B. (1992) Explaining Swedish Corporatism: The Formative Moment. *Scandinavian Political Studies* 15 (3):173–191.

29 Folkbildningsrådet (2008) *Årsredovisning med verksamhetsberättelse 2007*. Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet.

vated, according to the governmental policy documents, by the desire to support an enterprise that aims to make it possible for people to individually and collectively influence their position in life and promote commitment to participating in the development of society<sup>30</sup>. Consequently, the state has made demands regarding this democratic vision when supporting the study circles.

### ***The old system***

For decades, there were quite detailed recommendations on how the circles should be designed to benefit this vision. The National School Board, which until 1991 was the authority that oversaw and decided on the financial support for popular education, formulated recommendations and verified that these recommendations were followed. For instance, a special manual was produced and used in the 1980s to inform the study associations about how to organize study circles. These regulations stated, for instance, that a study circle should work for at least 15 periods or study hours (1 period/study hour = 45 minutes, not including pauses) and that the meetings should be spread over at least 4 weeks. A maximum of 20 participants and a minimum of 5 (later revised to 3) participants, including the study circle leader, had to be present for a meeting to be eligible for financial support. The circle was not allowed to meet more than twice a week and not for more than 3 study hours at a time. The study circle had to have a study plan approved by the education association, etc.<sup>31</sup>

Behind these specific recommendations was a set of principles formulated by the State, i.e. the responsible authority, which should be followed to ensure that the educational and democratic ideas behind the study circle were realized. Lars Karlsson summarizes these principles as follows:

1. A study circle should not be too short. It must have enough time to plan and to execute its work.
2. There must also be enough time between the SC meetings for the participants to let their new experiences sink in and to make their collective and individual preparations for the next SC meeting.

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30 Rubenson, K. (2006). The Nordic model of Lifelong Learning. *Compare* 36 (3):327–341.

31 Karlsson, L. (2000) *Study Circles in Targeted Intelligence Networks*. Seville: European Commission's Joint Research Centre, Institute for Prospective Technological Studies, p 11.

3. Each individual meeting should not be too long and exhausting.
4. The participants themselves, their knowledge and experience, were always the most important resource for the SC. The participants should also seek information from outside sources, but not to an extent that this spoiled the work within the Circle. It was important that, during every stage of the work, most of the time was spent in the relative security of the closed study circle
5. It was recommended that the SC form networks with other study circles, but it should reserve enough time for working on its own.
6. The number of participants should be large enough for a group process to develop, but not so large that not everyone could have a chance to actively contribute.
7. Even though the SC was considered as autonomous in its internal decisions, it should relate its work to an approved plan and although a Circle could chose its own SC monitor, the education association was responsible for ensuring that the monitor knew the SC rules, received proper training etc.<sup>32</sup>

This arrangement, where subsidies to study circles are regulated and controlled by a government agency, changed in 1991.

### ***The present system***

This change is part of a general change in governance. From this year, the state went from governing by rules to a system where governing is supposed to be done by formulating goals for the study circle activities and by investigating the results – to what degree they have accomplished their goals. The idea is that the study associations should find the best ways to reach goals without many regulations to follow. They should be focused on goals not regulations. The subsidies are, in principle, based on goal achievement. Responsibility for distribution and control was moved from the governmental agency, the National School Board, to an organization run by the study associations and folk high schools themselves. This new umbrella organization – The Swedish National Council of Adult Education (“Folkbildningsrådet” in Swedish) – is still operating. The state's role has subse-

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32 Quoted from Karlsson, L. (2000) *Study Circles in Targeted Intelligence Networks*. Seville: European Commission's Joint Research Centre, Institute for Prospective Technological Studies, p 12.

quently been limited to deciding on the size of subsidies to popular education, based on performance in relation to the overall purpose of these subsidies, determined by governmental evaluations. Here, one must also be aware of the fact that the state subsidy is only around 30% of the study associations' total economy. The overall perspective of goals, results and evaluations is applied as a general policy by the state, but is also common in other sectors as a management recipe. How long this recipe will act as a guiding principle is unclear, but there are no signs of an impending change. The policy based on evaluations and outcomes is poorly suited to the study circle tradition. One of the obvious problems in the case of study circles is the difficulty of evaluating an educational activity, which is very broad in terms of content and where there is no national curriculum, and where the study associations are independent and free to form the content. The goals, which are formulated by the government in relation to the state subsidies, are very general and abstract and generally speaking do not cover what participants think is important for the meaning of participating. There are thus a variety of problems related to measuring, especially if measuring is to be performed in a valid way. In the case of the study circle sector, one can view the National Council of Adult Education as an intermediate organization between the state and the nine study associations, which in principle govern themselves. The Council could thus be said to be a non-profit organization with the function of an authority.<sup>33</sup>

Hence, the National Council of Adult Education formulates recommendations for popular education and study circles and makes sure that grants are used effectively. Based on the general and abstract goals formulated by the state, the Council has formulated more detailed principles for the distribution of subsidies. These principles have similarities with the earlier system used by the National School Board, described above, but are less strict and more open for local organizers to make their own interpretations. Nevertheless, in the most recent regulations published by the Council for Adult Education in 2007<sup>34</sup> there still exist recommendations regarding, for instance, the minimum (3) and maximum number (12) of participants, minimum numbers of study hours (9) and meetings (3). However, both

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33 Lindgren, L. (1999) Det idealiserade föreningslivet. In *Civilsamhället*, Demokratiutredningens forskarvolym VIII, SOU 1999:84. Stockholm: Justitiedepartementet.

34 Folkbildningsrådet (2007) *Statsbidrag till studieförbund. Kriterier och fördelningsprinciper från och med 2007*. Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet.

state evaluations and the National Council for Adult Education have questioned the focus on quantity (i.e. number of study hours) when distributing subsidies. It has been claimed that the study associations, in their ambition to maximize subsidies to their organizations, have prioritized volume rather than quality when organizing study circles. In line with this, an emphasis on qualitative aspects regarding the work done by the study associations has emerged in discussions on the regulations for subsidies. Instead of exact quantitative criteria, more general recommendations on the nature of the study circles are presented in the regulations from 2007. This is motivated by a desire to promote both quality and flexibility. In these regulations, the study associations and their local offices are required to make sure that the study circles are organized in accordance with the general ideas behind the state subsidies of study circles. To receive subsidies, the study association should guarantee that the activities taking place involve planned study activities that benefit learning. It is made clear that the study circles should not concern regular activities in associations (such as committee meetings, pure construction work or sports activities), which has been found to be case in some evaluations.

In 2007, the National Council for Adult Education distributed 1.6 billion Swedish Crowns – SEK (approximately 165 million EURO) to the study associations, which, in turn, are responsible for the distribution of funds to the study circles. However, the state subsidy is not the only public support the study associations receive. In all, municipalities contribute SEK 400 million and the county council SEK 380 million that year<sup>35</sup>. These forms of subsidies do, however, vary considerably from municipality to municipality, according to the priorities in local political decision-making.

It is not easy to obtain a clear overall overview of the study associations' finances. First of all, there are nine independent study associations with their own administrations. In addition, these study associations are divided in to a national level, a district level and a local level; each of them with significant autonomy. It is the local offices that provide direct support to individual study circles. When the Swedish state conducted an evaluation of the support to popular education in 2004,

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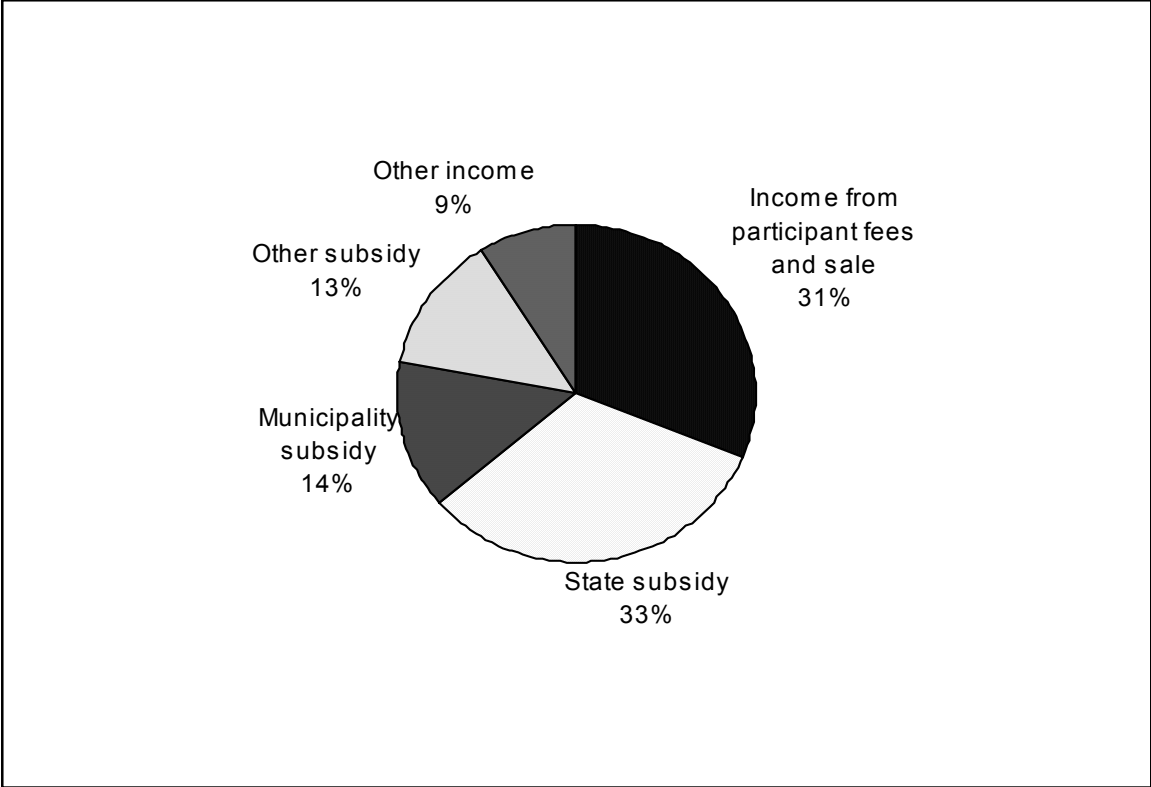
35 Folkbildningsrådet (2008) *Studieförbundens ekonomi 2007*. Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet.

a study of the study associations' finances was made.<sup>36</sup> The study presents a compilation of the local organizations' finances and provides a picture of how the study activities are financed. As shown in the diagram (Diagram 1) below, the state subsidy is the largest income item, but it does not even cover half the costs the local study associations have.

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36 Utredningen för statens utvärdering av folkbildningen 2004 (2004). *Folkbildning i brytnings-tid: en utvärdering av studieförbund och folkhögskolor : slutbetänkande*. SOU 2004:30. Stockholm: Fritzes offentliga publikationer .

**Diagram 1. Allocation of income related to educational activities entitled to subsidies at the local level of the Swedish study associations in 2002<sup>37</sup>**



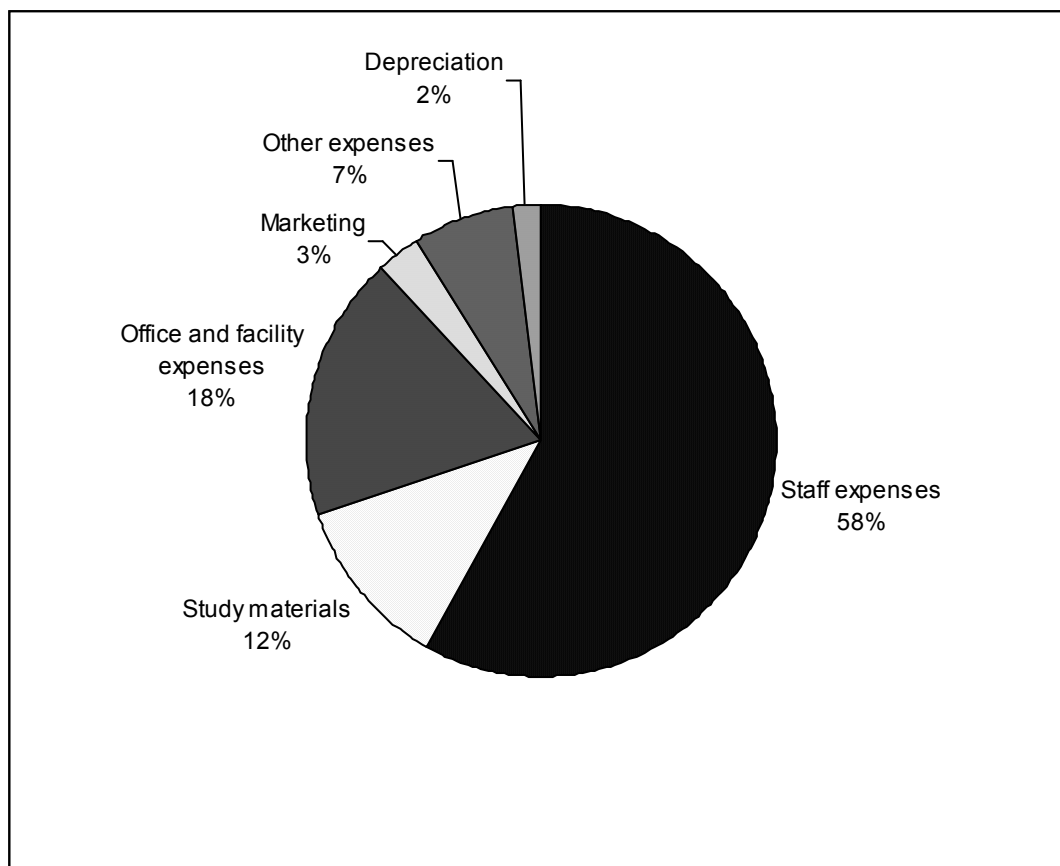
The second largest income source, Income from participant fees and sale, is mainly based on income from study circles where the participants pay a fee, which is the case for 30 percent of the total number of study circles (see below). The item “Other subsidies” includes support from county councils.

Diagram 2 below shows the study associations’ costs divided into different areas. Study circles are the largest part of the study association’s activities, but other activities such as cultural activities and public lectures are also included in these figures.

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37 Source: Op. cit., p 113.

**Diagram 2. Allocation of costs related to educational activities entitled to subsidies at the local level of the Swedish study associations in 2002**<sup>38</sup>



Staff is the largest cost item. A majority of the study associations' employees are administrators and officials, and only a minority of the permanent staff are study circle leaders. In 2007, a total of 4,155 non-study circle leaders, i.e. administrative staff, etc, were employed by the study associations. Out of total of 112,756 study circle leaders in 2007, only 524 were employed fulltime on a permanent basis. In the same year, 72,979 circle leaders worked unpaid (i.e. approximately 65%). The remaining 39,253 study circle leaders were paid on a temporary and part-time basis.<sup>39</sup> Office and facility costs, which are the second largest item, include study rooms. Consequently, only a limited portion of the public subsidies is directly visible to the participant in the study circle. Instead, most of the subsidies cover what can be described as an infrastructure that makes possible study circle activities.

<sup>38</sup> Source: Op. cit., p 115.

<sup>39</sup> Folkbildningsrådet (2008) *Studieförbundens ekonomi 2007*. Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet.



The distribution of subsidies is, however, linked to the study activities and the distribution of financial support to study associations and their local officials has usually been based on the number of study circles measured in study hours. Typically, each study circle leader is responsible for writing a standardized report regarding the number of meetings, their length and how many people participated, which is handed in to the local office of the study association when the study circle has finished. The circle is then registered. Here, the level of reported activity is an important factor when the subsidies are distributed to study associations and their local offices. During certain periods, circles consisting of prioritized groups of participants regarded as particularly important, such as immigrant groups, have been eligible for extra support.

### ***Statistics on the operation of study circles in Sweden***

The description above is a brief sketch of how the subsidies are distributed. The exact forms of distribution have varied over time and are constantly evolving. It is also important to note that there are big differences between different types of circles. In a large study of study circles in Sweden, the researchers Byström and Säfström distinguish three main types of circles, which they label “comrade-circles”, “association-circles” and “advertisement-circles”.<sup>40</sup> These three types of circles, which are presented below, differ in terms of whether they are based on fees paid by the participants, how they recruit participants, etc.

The “comrade-circle”, which comprises 27 per cent of the total number of study circles, consists of a group of friends who decide to start a study circle. They contact a local study association, which then may provide support in the form of study materials and location. One of the group members is chosen as the study circle leader. In these cases, participants usually do not pay fees and it is rare that the leaders are paid. The second type of circle, the “association-circle”, which comprises 43 percent of the total number of circles, is the most common form. These circles are organized via an association – e.g. a trade union, a political party, a church or a sports club – and are intended for members. The circle is led by someone in the organization and the participants usually do not pay any fees. The association organizing the circle receives financial support from the study association

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40 Byström, J. & Säfström, F. (2006). *Studiecirkeldeltagare 2004: två rapporter om deltagare i studieförbundens cirkelverksamhet*. Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet.

to which they are affiliated. The third type, the “advertisement-circle”, which comprises 30 percent of the total number, is usually organized by the study association itself and advertised to the public. These circles are often lead by an employed study circle leader and the participants pay a fee.

Consequently, there is variety of study circles types, some based on personal ties between friends, some linked to organizations, where participants are members and some circles that gather participants through a market logic, e.g., attract participants through advertising. Although the “association-circles” represent the largest proportion of study circles in the whole system, this varies widely between the study associations, depending on their profile. The study association with links to the trade union movement and the religious oriented study associations have a large proportion of association-circles. This is in contrast to, for example, the study association that is linked to the university extension movement where the majority of study circles organized are advertisement-circles.<sup>41</sup>

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41 Byström, J. & Säfström, F. (2006). *Studiecirkeldeltagare 2004: två rapporter om deltagare i studieförbundens cirkelverksamhet*. Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet.

## An international outlook

As stated above, there is considerable heterogeneity when it comes to the study circles in the Swedish context. Different social and economic conditions, the variation in interests among participants, the different political and religious profiles of study associations; all of these factors affect the form, functions and outcomes of study circles. If we broaden the perspective to encompass an international outlook, we will almost certainly find even greater heterogeneity due to different national contexts. Although the study circles have a specific role in Sweden and some of the Scandinavian countries as a mass phenomenon, we do find them elsewhere.

The practice in itself, irrespective of what people may call it, could probably be found worldwide; i.e. that people voluntarily gather in small groups – e.g. in a social movement, an association or just among friends – to learn on a regular basis more about a subject of common interest. However, in some countries there exist movements and organizations that explicitly refer to the study circle as a method for learning and social action in civil society. In some countries, attempts have also been made to introduce study circles similar to the Swedish ones.

In the United States, the Study Circles Resource Center was formed in 1989 to spread the study circle idea and to support the organization of study circles. The centre, which later changed its name to Everyday Democracy, has published literature on how to work in organized circles. It has also developed many community-wide programs addressing various economic and social issues, such as foreign policy, capital punishment, race relations and gay rights. Today, the organization has a well developed website, with resources for community workers and study circle leaders.<sup>42</sup> A parallel to the American Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) is the Australian Study Circles Network. This Australian network has published several books based on SCRS handbooks and resources for study circles, but adapted to the Australian context.<sup>43</sup>

There are also several examples of Swedish international aid and development programs characterized by an ambition to “export” the study circle method to de-

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42 Brophy, M. (2001) *The study circle: participatory action research, with and for the unemployed*. Diss. Melbourne: Victoria University; See <http://www.everyday-democracy.org>.

43 Brophy, M. (2001) *The study circle: participatory action research, with and for the unemployed*. Diss. Melbourne; See <http://www.studyircles.net.au>.

veloping countries. Most recently, this has been the case in Bangladesh where there is an ongoing project aimed at introducing study circles. The organization, Study Circle Bangladesh, plays a central role in this project and has developed several guidelines for organizers and study circle leaders, both in Bengali and English, which are available on their website.<sup>44</sup>

Other examples of Swedish initiatives can be found in, for example, Tanzania, Chile and Portugal, as well as in Estonia and Slovenia. The results have varied. Some critical voices have been raised regarding the ambition to export Swedish study circles without considering the local context thoroughly. Johan Norbeck, a Swedish adult educator involved in a study circle project in Portugal, makes a (self-)critical comment on this.

*“Swedes working in Portugal and other countries have had a naïve belief in the inherent attractive and motivating power of the study circle. We feel that it should automatically be as attractive to people in other countries as it is in Sweden. [...] If another country requests to be informed about Swedish forms of adult education, it is not wrong to agree and present these forms of education to different categories of educators. But it is important that we encourage them to see where these forms would possibly fit in and benefit their environment and culture, in order not to confine ourselves and the foreign target group to Swedish experience.”*<sup>45</sup>

The educational researcher Kerstin Wallin makes a similar comment in her dissertation on development aid by the Swedish trade unions to Chile. The project, which includes an ambition to introduce study circles to the Chilean trade union movement, proved to be more or less a disappointment to the actors involved. The study circles were not considered by the Chilean trade unionist to be a very suitable method. According to Wallin, existing hierarchical and authoritarian patterns in the Chilean trade unions, as well as the existence of a highly conflict-driven political environment, meant that study activities based on horizontal relations and deliberative discussions had difficulties making an impact. In addition, the time-span of the study circles was not perceived as suitable for the time resources and

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44 See <http://www.studycirclebangladesh.info>

45 Norbeck, J. (2002) Study Circles in Portugal. In: Albinson, F., Norbeck, J. & Sundenĭ, R. (2002). *Folk development education and democracy in a development perspective: personal accounts and reflections*. Stockholm: SIDA, p 39–40.

training needs that existed. Although, this does not have to mean, Wallin concludes, that the study circle cannot play a role in Latin America, or be a method to use in development work.

*“However, to expect that the study circle in developing countries today will produce the same results that they may once have produced in Sweden can only be termed unrealistic. [...] My belief is that projects involving study circles and participatory methods would benefit from careful consideration of the participants’ previous experience of similar activities, the history of the organisations concerned and the general social context.”*<sup>46</sup>

The need to consider the local context has been underscored by other researchers in the field. In his doctoral dissertation, Pelle Åberg examines the “travelling of ideas” from Swedish popular education to Estonia through the contacts between the Swedish study association ABF and the Estonian AHL (Open Education Association) during the 1990s and 2000s. Åberg claims that popular education methods and ideas, among them the study circle, “have been disseminated via the contacts but it is also clear that Estonian actors have edited the Swedish models to fit better into the local context”.<sup>47</sup> He concludes that ideas, such as the idea of the study circle, are likely to be translated and thus changed when they travel from one context to another, depending on local circumstances and needs, i.e. they do not become a “blueprint copy” of their origin.

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In this text, we have made an overview of the study circles as a tradition and state of the art today in Sweden. We have also given a brief international review of study circles. If the reader wishes to know more about the study circles, both in Sweden and internationally, we recommend the bibliography below. It includes both academic research literature and instructions and handbooks for study circle leaders and organizers. First, we present an extensive bibliography of English literature on study circles. This is followed by a selection of literature in languages other than English and Swedish.

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46 Wallin, K. E. (2000). *Folkbildning på export?: sammanhang, förutsättningar, möjligheter*. Diss. Stockholm : Stockholm University, p 172.

47 Åberg, P. (2008). *Translating popular education: civil society cooperation between Sweden and Estonia*. Diss. Stockholm : Stockholms University, p 232.

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## ***A selection of literature in languages other than English***

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Bogotaj, N. (Ed.) (2005) *Študijski krožki : od zamisli do sadov v prvem desetletju (Study circles: from the idea to results in the first decade)*, (Zbirka študije in raziskave, 12). Ljubljana: Andragoški center Slovenije.

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Kindström, C.; Karst, N.; Baranda Mejia, M. (2004) *Una presentació del método de círculo de estudio*. Stockholm: Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan.

## ***Internet resources***

### **Australia**

Australian Study Circles Network

<http://www.studycircles.net.au>

### **Bangladesh**

Study Circle Bangladesh

<http://www.studycirclebangladesh.info>

### **Canada**

Study circles – A guide for programmers

<http://www.nald.ca/CLR/study/scguide.htm>

### **Sweden**

The Swedish National Council for Adult Education

<http://www.folkbildning.se/page/492/english.htm>

The Swedish Adult Education Association

<http://www.studieforbunden.se/Pages/english.html>

### **USA**

Everyday Democracy – Previously the Study Circles Resource Center

<http://www.everyday-democracy.org>