Summary: From immigrant service bureau to refugee reception center

The dissertation investigates what happened when a new field – the incorporation of immigrants and refugees – was to be organized at the local level in Sweden. The result shows that the public authorities during the 40 year period that the study covers struggled with several questions, such as: how they should organize this, who should carry out the work, what should practically be done, and, towards which groups should it be directed? It is around these questions that the local (municipal) work with immigrants and refugees revolved, without finding any clear and permanent answers. Here I summarize the central arguments and results of the study by discussing what defines two roughly defined periods, the period of immigrant service bureaus (1965-1985) and the period of refugee reception centers (1985-2008). I do this in terms of four themes: responsibility, personnel and competence structure, direction of the work, and target group, which together constitute what I call the organizations’ ‘practices of incorporation.’ I also analyze what has tended to persist over time and what has changed.

The main aim with the dissertation is to illuminate and analyze how municipal practices of incorporation have developed and changed from the mid 1960’s and approximately 40 years on. To accomplish this I have conducted a historical and comparative study of eight municipalities. The material comprises several different sources, from interviews with civil servants and participant observation, to archive-material and secondary literature. The material is assembled into different ‘municipal stories’ where I have outlined the development for each case from the four themes mentioned above. These stories have then been compared and analyzed to illuminate the variation between the different municipalities, and what has been characteristic of developments over time. My theoretical perspective is mainly drawn from the sociology of organizations, with a focus on the history of organizations. (Important sources of inspiration here are Stinchcombe 1965 and Ahrne & Papakostas 2002, from whom I’ve borrowed several central concepts).

The first initiatives to deal with the adaptation of immigrants and other ‘problems’ that arose in the encounter between the new inhabitants and Swedish society started to emerge in municipalities in the mid-1960’s. To be able to understand the special circumstances behind this development, I use the concept ‘historical contingency structure,’ which emphasizes the
importance of the historical point in time for the creation of new organizations. This theoretical perspective aided me in identifying some societal changes which coincided in time and together created possibilities for a new type of organization to be founded, namely the immigrant bureau.

The changes consisted primarily of the changing character of the migration stream to Sweden during the 1960’s. The Nordic citizens who previously had dominated the immigration stream were increasingly replaced by non-Nordic immigrants. At the same time new perspectives led to a change from perceiving the immigrants as temporary labor, to regarding them as a permanent part of the population. Additionally, the idea that the immigrants should adapt to Swedish norms and the Swedish culture was increasingly questioned from different quarters, and this debate also affected the authorities. This historical contingency structure contributed to the immigrants’ situation becoming a political issue and thereby creating a favorable climate for creating new organizations. Some of the municipalities in my population were amongst the first in the country to initiate some kind of organization for the incorporation of immigrants. How the organizing took place, that is, which actors dealt with the question and how the aim of the organization was formulated, differed between the municipalities.

The very first organizations were founded in the mid-1960’s in ‘the shadow’ of other organizations, like trade unions and educational associations. The other possibility was that the bureaus were established in ‘free spaces’ which meant that from the start they were independent units in the municipal administration. How and why different actors took hold of the question can be understood in relation to the local context. A particularly prominent factor seems to be the labor market structure. In municipalities with a powerful dominance of heavy industry the trade unions tended to be a strong driving force in this question. In municipalities with a considerable service sector it was instead educational associations who initiated the activities.

The organizations were established as a response to the demands for service to the immigrants, from trade unions, educational associations and municipal bodies. It was not the immigrants themselves who defined the needs, but other actors. It was taken for granted that the immigrants were in need of education and being informed about Swedish society – the idea that the reverse could be the case did not yet exist. Above all the immigrants needed information about Swedish society and the Swedish labor market. This was mentioned as the
main aim for all of the newly established immigrant service bureaus. An additional number of other aims were also mentioned which the bureaus were supposed to meet, for example helping to avoid linguistic conf usions, meeting social and counseling needs, and alleviating adaptation problems. How this took form in practice varied, as did the extent to which the different bureaus focused on different activities.

When the decision once was made to establish an immigrant service bureau, the structure had to be approved. It was both a question of who should be responsible for the organization and what kind of personnel should be hired. The form it should take was a relatively open question which resulted in there initially existing a great variation between the bureaus. Even in one and the same municipality it took time to attain stability. It was not unusual that responsibility for the organization was changed up to four times during the first ten years. For a long time there was no clear belonging or function for immigrant questions in the municipalities. It was instead several different actors who became responsible for this during the first 15 years. But a certain standardization occurred over the course of time, and in the beginning of the 1980’s all the bureaus had either the municipal executive board or a special immigrant committee as the responsible agency. In other words, it took thus nearly 15 years for the immigrant service bureaus to become institutionalized.

This institutionalization did not lead to any one specific occupational group setting its mark on the bureaus. Instead, there were other logics behind the choice of employees. The immigrant service bureaus started as very small units, sometimes with only one person employed, and then increased gradually. Above all the number of employees increased during the end of the 1970’s, and amounted to a maximum of approximately ten permanent employees. No formal competence-demands existed, even if a degree in social work often was desirable. This resulted in great variations between different municipalities. Some bureaus had a relatively low educational level among employees, with a majority having only degrees from elementary school or junior secondary school. In other municipalities the educational level was high, often in the form of a university level social work education. The lack of formal competence-demands or criteria for how the recruitment was handled led to other selection-processes taking place. The bureaus were connected by a high level of language competence in all the bureaus. Language skills were definitely the most decisive additional qualification when it came to employment. Which languages were important differed between the different municipalities depending on which immigrant-groups dominated. This also
meant that the immigration service bureaus were dominated by persons with a foreign background. Even though no form of professionalization took place, there was uniformity in the emphasis on linguistic competence. When the refugee reception-centers later became established, the emphasis changed from language competence to a more general cultural competence.

Even in relation to the activities that were pursued by the immigration service bureaus, there was initially a great variation. They engaged in everything from information to interpretation/translation services, counseling work and support for Swedish language teaching. The main function was however as a channeling organ. Immigrants could turn to the bureaus to obtain help in contacting other authorities and organizations. This activity was mainly directed towards individual immigrants who turned to the bureaus on their own. In addition to this function, which was shared by all bureaus in the studied population, they developed different activities. Some of them were, for example, quick to develop interpretation services and became the official interpretation centers for the municipalities. This function developed much later into an integrated part of the work in other bureaus. Some were early on directed towards counseling support. This work, as the support for teaching Swedish, eventually disappeared due to the fact that these functions were already covered by other authorities.

In the middle of the 1970’s the organizations took on a partly new direction. The main activities with individually oriented information and interpretation-service still remained, and constituted the main part of the activities at the immigration service centers. But new lines of activities were directed towards different kinds of collectives, like immigrant associations, authorities, administrations, and the general Swedish public. The bureaus became responsible for educating civil servants at other administrators in what was called ‘immigrant knowledge.’ The immigrant associations played an increasingly important role. In some municipalities their role had been accentuated already in the late 1960’s, above all because they supposedly facilitated the adaptation. Different ways of supporting the associations evolved, for example particular association grants and assistance with finding premises for them. The view of the associations widened during the 1970’s, into promoting a culture-preserving function. This was closely connected with the breakthrough of the multicultural ideology in the immigration policy at the time. The associations were now considered to be forums where the immigrants had a chance to speak their own language and practice their own traditions. Furthermore the
associations were utilized to spread information about different cultures to the Swedish public, which now were defined as a new target group for the work of the bureaus.

At this time the influx of refugees started to attract greater attention, despite the fact that it still was small and wasn’t expected to increase to any greater degree (an incorrect presumption as it soon would become apparent). In 1985 a new system for the reception of refugees was introduced, which radically changed the conditions for the municipalities’ work with immigrants and integration in general, and for the immigration service bureaus above all. The work of municipalities that was institutionalized in the immigration service bureaus was broken as soon as they had a new group to work with – refugees – and new instructions for how this should be handled – with directives from the Social Services Act. The connection between immigration and work was broken when the National Labor Market Board’s responsibility for the reception and social introduction programs for refugees was transferred to the municipalities. Instead of letting the needs of the labor market direct the content of the introduction programs, the social and psychological needs of the refugees were put at the forefront. The multicultural immigration policy declined in significance. In this way, new organizational possibilities opened up on municipal level, applicable to responsibility, personnel and competence and also the direction of the activity.

The difficulty in defining where the refugee questions belong to has led to conflicts about the role of social welfare offices. Indecision about this question is reflected in the variation and instability which the municipalities show in relation to the choice of who should bear responsibility. During a little more than 20 years, from 1985 and to the beginning of the 2000s, responsibility has on average changed four times in each municipality. Responsibility was transferred from the municipal executive board or the immigrant committee to the social welfare office, and from there further on to different kinds of individual and labor market agencies. There is a trend that the social welfare offices, in different constellations, obtain greater influence during this period, but it’s never unchallenged. In the municipalities critical discussions continue regarding the different organizational solutions. The criticism against placing responsibility with the social welfare offices focuses on the institutional connection to it creating an assumed association to the offices’ main clients – persons dependent on social welfare, and a ‘welfare dependence trap.’ The low status of this administration is ‘contaminating’ to the group of refugees who run the risk to getting caught in a dependence on social welfare and becoming marginalized from the labor market. Despite an awareness of
this risk all the municipalities have, at least during some period, appointed the social welfare office to be the responsible authority. The criticism had a greater impact in the 1990s, and during the 2000s the responsibility for refugee reception has tended to be transferred to an administrative unit with responsibility for labor market programs. But in most cases there still remains a close connection to the traditional social welfare service, only under new forms.

The increasing significance of the social welfare office also affected which ‘new’ groups were hired to manage the work. Irrespective of how the municipalities chose to organize refugee reception, with the social welfare office as a responsible authority or not, they hired social workers as refugee caseworkers. One reason I emphasize this is that a reform in 1985 created a connection to this occupational group by basing this type of work on the Social Service Act. It led to heightened competence demands and a professionalization of the staff. This not only led to more social welfare workers becoming employed, it also led to the centers becoming populated by so-called ‘refugee assistants.’ Initially the division of labor was such that the refugee caseworkers took care of administrative and counseling tasks and the refugee assistants did the practical work. During the first few years, the new recruited refugee caseworkers tended to be social workers with an ethnically Swedish background. The assistants had a more varied background, both regarding education and national origin.

During the period of the refugee reception centers, it wasn’t primarily linguistic competence which was emphasized as being important, but rather a more general ‘cultural competence.’ It is indicated to be based upon own experiences of immigration or a close relationship with people having such experiences. I discuss this phenomenon from the concept of ‘ethnical match’ in widened understanding. The underlying idea is that ethnic matching will give the client better service since the civil servant has knowledge about the culture and norms in question and can accordingly adjust the information and activities. This is supposed to create a greater sense of confidence between the civil servant and the client, minimize the risk for racism, and create self-confidence in the client since the civil servant can function as a role model. My material doesn’t support these presumptions fully, but shows that conflicts can result from these encounters. However, the results also show that there can be other advantages with having staff with varied backgrounds. One presumed advantage is that colleagues with a personal experience of migration or exile can contribute to a greater understanding among the rest of the staff for the clients’ situation and background, and also impede the use of a prejudiced jargon.
When the municipalities became responsible in the mid-1980’s for the reception of refugees they received a new target group for their work. The refugees, until then rather few in number, had been the responsibility of the National Labor Market Board, and not until they moved from the refugee centers (‘camps’) to a municipality to start working or to obtain training, did they become a municipal responsibility. Now an increasing number of refugees came directly to the municipalities, became a new target group, and required special introduction activities. The connection between work and immigration is broken with the refugee reception reform. Criticism of the National Labor Market Board’s handling of the refugees as a manpower reserve had an impact and resulted in a new view of refugees. They were considered being in need of more social and counseling support, and it was based upon this perspective that the work of the municipalities should be modeled. It was soon observed that the consequence was that the refugees obtained a weak connection to the labor market.

This was the prelude to ‘the Work Strategy’ in due course returning to the introduction activities for refugees, more powerful than ever since the National Labor Market Board was relieved of responsibility for refugee reception in the mid-1980s. This is reflected in new occupational groups having arrived at the reception centers, such as apprenticeship placement counselors, as well as decreased roles for others groups like information officers. Likewise, the types of activities taking place during the introductory period were also affected. The introduction of so-called individual introductory plans (IPL) and introductory remuneration illustrates this direction. These measures contain clear labor market incentives, as well as several control mechanisms. For example IPLs are designed as a contract between the refugee and the administration. The design of the introductory period is supposed to imitate working life and therefore contains activities which comply with a normal work week of 40 hours. The ‘participant,’ which is the new term instead of ‘client,’ is bound to complete certain activities or goals. Attendance at the activities, for example Swedish language classes, civic information, apprenticeships or other activities, is registered and followed up on. Invalid absence results in a deduction from the remunerations.

The introductory activity has become more and more individually based, at the expense of the collective activities. In several municipalities information to the public and authorities has decreased. The collective activities that have evolved during the period take the form of discussion groups. Their purpose is partly to be component of the introduction program, and
partly a way of educating or even ‘raising’ the participants in ‘Swedish’ norms and values with regard to questions of democracy, equality, and family relations. These groups have become a way of dealing with troublesome – male – attitudes and conduct. Even the contact with immigrant associations has decreased or changed radically. Above all, an entirely different idea about the role of the associations has developed. The cultural preservation function that was stressed during the 1970s and 1980s has been almost completely abandoned. Instead it is often presumed that culture preservation is segregating and isolating from the rest of the society. The municipalities place greater focus on the new immigrant groups than on the associations of the established groups. Furthermore there exists a more powerful steering of the associations’ activities which emanates more from the will and needs of the municipality than from the associations themselves. The financing of association that used to be common have become subject to conditionality – just like individual refugees, the immigrant associations also have to sign contracts where they promise to contribute with some kind of service in return (defined by the municipality) to obtain financing.

My study of the history of the organizations shows both the change of practice that has occurred and the stability that remains at the same time. It also shows that the transition to refugee reception centers made it necessary to redefine and renegotiate the practices of incorporation. During the first 20 years covered in this dissertation, the immigrant service bureaus developed into independent administrative agencies. There are examples of cases where the social welfare office was a central actor already during this time, but the tendency is nevertheless that the bureaus were established and consolidated as independent administrative units within the municipalities, that they become institutionalized as organizations. The break occurs as soon as the new system for refugee reception is initiated in the mid-1980s, when the role of the social welfare offices increases considerably. During the most recent years which the study covers there are signs that labor market units in the municipalities are strengthening their role in relation to the reception centers, but also that the social welfare offices ‘working under cover’ continue to have the main responsibility for reception centers. The analysis shows however that the role of the offices has been subject to discussion and criticism during the whole period.

In sum, the introduction of municipal refugee reception centers had a profound effect on the incorporation practices of the immigrant service bureaus. Ultimately this led to all the bureaus being closed during the 1990s. In some individual cases they have lived on, or had some of
their functions included in the praxis of the refugee reception centers, but on the whole they became increasingly marginalized, and finally disappeared. Today, the refugee reception system is also in the midst of change with a new reform from December 2010 taking force. In my dissertation I describe and analyze Swedish municipalities’ long historical experience in incorporating immigrants. In this we see both successes and failures, and I feel it important to take these experiences into consideration in the future formulation of policy in this field.