

DOWN, BUT DEFINITELY NOT OUT

Being left behind does not always mean being left out. At least it need not, if you are lucky enough to come across a man like Alec Carlberg and an enterprise like Basta Arbetskooperativ, which helps the most vulnerable members of society to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Basta is a 100-strong workers' co-operative in Nyqvarn, 40 km southwest of Stockholm, whose members have overcome their addiction and now run a self-supporting business. After ten years, Basta has not only proved the original model, but has transferred it to a second location near Sweden's second city, Göteborg. It has also developed new training models that have been taken up nationally and internationally.

It is all too easy to find yourself left behind in the competitive rat race of modern society. And once you drop out, it can be very hard to climb back in. Factors such as bad education, unemployment, homelessness, abuse and drug addiction can stack up to form an insuperable barrier to social integration. Self-confidence, once lost, is very hard to rebuild.

"I and Basta want to show policy-makers and the public that marginalised people, in our case people with severe drug problems, are not hopeless cases who need permanent care," Alec says. "Given the right surroundings they can produce high quality products and run an efficient company which will amaze ordinary people and fight prejudice." The formula seems to work well, because he was nominated 'Businessman of 2005' by the Rotary Club in Nykvarn, the municipality where Basta is situated.



Houseproud – Patrik Johansson, Kristina Blixt and Thomas Fröberg on the steps of the Basta Väst headquarters at Tubbekulla near Göteborg

EMPOWERING THE MOST VULNERABLE IN SOCIETY

The *Empowerment for the Future* development partnership has created a good practice model of how an empowerment-based social enterprise can address social problems. It focuses specifically on rehabilitating drug abusers and thereby resolving their problems of unemployment and homelessness. It brought together four partners: Basta, a Göteborg-based voluntary organisation called FUNK, the University of Lund – and an insurance company. *"The insurance company, Folksam, joined the partnership because drug-related crime is a considerable cost for insurance companies, so it has a very simple interest in finding better routes to rehabilitation,"* Alec explains. Meanwhile the University of Lund was looking for new community-based ways to tackle social marginalisation, which it could incorporate into its training courses for social workers. *"It found social mobilisation through social enterprises a very interesting approach,"* he confirms.

The project helps the most vulnerable people, who exist on the fringes of society. They are typically in middle age, and three-quarters are male. They have usually had little education, have been long-term unemployed and are homeless. Many have been victims of physical, psychic or sexual violence, and many are drug addicts. *"The main barrier to reintegrating them is their lack*

of self confidence,” says Alec. The need to integrate these vulnerable groups into the labour market features in guideline 18 of the EU’s integrated guidelines for growth and jobs.¹

EVERYONE CHOOSES THEIR OWN FUTURE

Basta aimed to find innovative ways of rehabilitation to tackle long-term drug use. Many of the people who find their way to Basta have already made a few attempts to quit drugs, but have failed in ordinary therapeutic communities. That meant that the social services were not very keen to spend a lot of money for a new effort with an uncertain result. The Basta system attracted their interest because it succeeds in integrating people at half the cost of an ordinary therapeutic community.

The social service pays for one year’s rehabilitation. Because Basta is not a therapeutic community but a trading enterprise, people who want to stay can stay and work within the company as long as they feel that they need the security of being a part of a company where no drugs exist, either at work, or after hours. At Basta people are not considered as ‘clients’; during the first year they are apprentices, and after that, if they choose to stay on, they become colleagues. This is of great psychological importance in the rehabilitation process. This sense of belonging shows in the way members like Namu Nambiar describe themselves: *“Today I am not a junky, and I am not a client, and I not an ex-client. I am an ordinary horse breeder.”*

REDISCOVERING SELF-HELP

Social enterprise is something quite new in modern Swedish society. At the beginning of the last century the working class movement created housing and consumer co-operatives to provide lodging and groceries at reasonable prices. But from the mid-1950s the welfare state took over much of the work with socially marginalised people such as long-term unemployed, disabled, homeless and alcohol- and drug-addicted people. One of the results of this was that empowerment by self-organisation among poor and marginalised persons was downplayed as a method of tackling severe social problems. EFF has reawoken this old tradition of self-organisation. This revival has benefits for both marginalised people and society as a whole. The individual beneficiaries gain a stable and secure livelihood, while society enjoys an economically efficient way of tackling problems in the modern welfare state.

Basta offers its members job training and coaching to set up a new business. The qualification they gain has an important role in building self-esteem. “Long-term drug use leads to low self-esteem, which is one of the main reasons why people have such difficulties quitting drugs,” says Alec. “They don’t dare to face the ‘ordinary world’ when they are not on drugs. The qualification they get after one year’s study both strengthens their self-esteem and prepares them for real working life – both vocationally and psychologically.” Kristoffer Lindwall backs him up: “I have always hated school, but now at the age of 40 I have become a graduate and can begin working as a builder.”

BASTA SPREADS ITS WINGS

Basta’s example has now inspired a second group, across the country near the port city of Göteborg, to set up a similar enterprise. It came about as the answer to a heartfelt need. Thomas Fröberg ran his own taxi company till he lapsed into drug abuse. He managed to get himself off drugs without the support of the social services – but he had lost his business and family. He heard about Basta in Stockholm, felt that he would like to create something similar, and got in touch. For two years he worked with Basta to start ‘Basta-Väst’. During this time he took a group of policy-makers from Göteborg on a study visit to Basta: they were so impressed that they undertook to support a new ‘Basta-Väst’ for its first three years. It is now recognised by the social services departments in western Sweden, who recommend it to drug users wanting to reform.

The new social enterprise is housed in a yellow-painted 100-year-old farmhouse in the middle of the woods at Tubbekulla, in the municipality of Fristad, some 80 kilometres inland from Göteborg.

¹ *Integrated guidelines for growth and jobs (2005-2008)*, COM(2005) 141. See http://europa.eu.int/growthandjobs/pdf/COM2005_141_en.pdf

It has now been running for two years and is already economically self-sufficient. Sixteen people, all ex-drug users, are working within the company, mainly in building trades. Its main source of income is public works contracts with municipalities in western Sweden, which it bids for, and wins, in open competition. The co-operative is also bidding for long-term construction contracts and for maintenance jobs in parks and other green areas in the municipalities.

FIXING THINGS AND FIXING THEMSELVES

Outside Göteborg's central station engine sheds stands a row of gleaming electric locomotives – the handiwork of Basta Väst longest-term resident, Patrik Johansson. "I found Basta two years ago," he says. "I was tired of being on drugs, but I didn't want therapy – I wanted a real job. You feel better if you have a real job." Patrik saw a television news report about Basta and came for an interview. He was accepted, moved in, and started work in the kitchen. But he soon made the transition to working in the outside world. "Nowadays I work here in the mornings, cleaning between five and 15 engines," he says. "Then in the afternoon I work on the contract administration at Basta Väst." Sure enough, later in the day there he is at headquarters, on the phone negotiating contracts. Basta residents are nothing if not versatile. They are also energetic. Even after a 5 a.m. start and a hard day's graft, many of them still like to round off the day with a little weight lifting in the gym they have built themselves in the barn. Without trying, Patrik is also a powerful marketing tool for Basta: "My old friends are all jealous that I have a job, a car and am off drugs," he says.

Continuing the railway theme, another team of residents is reroofing a villa by the terminus of the Anten Gräfsnäs preserved steam railway, near Alingsås. One of the team, Rickard Sörelid, has only been at Basta for six months. In that period he has not only cut his hair and smartened up his appearance, but rediscovered a whole set of skills he had forgotten he possessed: cooking, welding, roofing... "You can't imagine it's the same person," comments Thomas Fröberg. "Now he wants to learn all the time." He once managed a team of 60 people as a sub-contractor to Volvo, so perhaps Basta will benefit in this way from his re-empowerment too.

Maintaining the high level of motivation is only possible because not everybody gets in. People may find out about Basta from the media, the internet, or their social worker or parole officer, but a professional referral is not enough. Applicants have to go through a selection interview which is designed to weed out people who don't really want to be there – and the interviewers know the ropes because they have been in exactly the same situation themselves. Even so, Basta doesn't suit everybody. "Some people find that it gets too much and they just disappear in the middle of the night. That's why we have to have people available to step in and get the work done," says Thomas Fröberg, who is not averse to putting his own overalls on when needed.

The original Basta is now home to around 100 people, and Basta Väst to sixteen, all but one male. Their ages range from 21 to 47, with the average being 33 years old. There is a small core of residents who plan to stay there in the long term, but not everyone settles in: in the two years since it was set up, 37 people have moved in, then moved on. At present, most of the residents live in temporary buildings, but Basta is building new accommodation to give long-term residents somewhere decent to live. Half the members work outside, and half on site. Others, such as self-taught bookkeeper Towe Ljunggren, live outside but come to Basta Väst to work. "The social services wrote me off as I was too old," she explains. "It was my mother who detoxified me and helped me move into Basta." Now, she manages the accounts of a half-million-euro business up to audit standard.



Clean green machines – Patrik Johansson and one of his charges

Thomas and the other members are constantly on the lookout for new contracts, and find local residents and businesses pretty keen to offer them work. "There was some suspicion at first, but now we are well-known locally," he says. There is an efficient logistic system. One member,

Janne Karlström, has the job of looking after all the tools and organising the car pool which ferries the workforce to and fro, a service which is charged out to revenue-generating activities. The next step is for Basta residents to start their own independent businesses under the Basta umbrella: Joakim Andersson, who found out about Basta from his lawyer, has learnt the trade of tiling and is building up a team to take on larger jobs. Basta residents live all expenses paid, but as the amount of responsibility he takes on rises, so will the allowance he receives.

Basta definitely makes empowerment work, as its members are keen to show. "Ninety-five per cent of the people at Basta are ex-drug users," says Kristina Blixt, co-ordinator of the EQUAL partnership. "We don't rely on a separate professional staff. If you give to people, they give back to you."

A SUPPORTIVE PARTNERSHIP

The different skills and experiences of EFF's partner organisations fitted together well. Basta provided the experience of setting up a co-operative integration enterprise, and FUNK the contacts on the ground in the Göteborg area. The University of Lund contributed evaluation expertise, and once it has assessed the project's results, insurer Folksam is a possible vector to multiply the experience more broadly.

But the glue that bound the partners together was Thomas Fröberg's long-term vision and determination as a social entrepreneur. His crucial break was to identify the official responsible for working with voluntary organisations in the regional government. From the start, she understood the potential of a reintegration enterprise that was run by the clients themselves, so did not let the idea get taken over by professionals. She could see that Thomas was serious, and suggested that the European Social Fund support might be useful. Thomas then had to convince Basta that he had what it took to start a second Basta. Commitments were firmed up following a conference he organised to sell the idea to social services officials and politicians in Göteborg.

"Having the support of the original Basta has meant that we have been able to grow from zero to 16 people in three years; without them it would probably have taken twice as long," Thomas says. "We have grown so fast we haven't had time to bring other partners on board. But we have just reached an agreement with the construction trade union, based on the idea that we work with other companies, not in competition with them. This will open up new markets for us."

A RETURN ON SOCIETY'S INVESTMENT

Basta has a competitive edge when bidding for municipal contracts to offer therapeutic services to drug users, because it only needs to earn around half its income from its therapeutic work. The other half comes from the sale of goods and services such as construction, graffiti removal, design, carpentry, horse breeding, a dog kennels and vocational training. This productive activity is an integral part of Basta's alternative rehabilitation process, complementing other more expensive therapeutic methods. This brings in around half the co-operative's income.

Basta Väst follows the same model: it receives a rehabilitation allowance of about €80 per day for up to one year for each person it takes in, but after that each person has to pay their way. So far, shortage of work is not a problem. "I knew we would have to work night and day for the first five years," says Thomas. "It's been a very lucky start, and we have broken even in our second year. The guys here need three or four years to become sustainable. After that, maybe I can think about starting up somewhere new."

A cost-benefit analysis of the value added for society of enterprises like Basta is now ongoing and will be presented at a conference in the Swedish parliament in October 2005. Preliminary studies show that even if a drug user stays at Basta for one year, and then goes back to his old life, society reaps a 50% return on its investment in terms of reduced cost of health care and crime. If that person succeeds in holding down a job and stays on at Basta, then social profitability rises as he starts to pay into the benefit system rather than being a drain on it.

LESSONS FOR THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Basta has also created a new educational approach for long-term unemployed adults. It has set up its own education system called YES – *Yrkes- och Entreprenörutbildning* (vocational and entrepreneurial education). The school offers a one-year course that leads a secondary school certificate recognised by both employers and trade unions. Students work in small groups of up to eight. They learn social and entrepreneurial skills in the mornings and trade skills, taught by specialist tutors who come in from local schools, in the afternoons. Half the time is spent on the Basta premises and half on work placements. Skills offered so far include carpentry, bricklaying, dog and horse breeding, computer training, plumbing and restaurant operation. “Most of our users have no educational qualifications whatsoever to their name, and this is naturally a barrier to getting a job,” says Kristina Blixt. “One innovation we made was to take the compulsory Swedish, English and mathematics out of the syllabus. This makes the course much more relevant to what the users actually need. If they learn maths, it’s through the practical work they do.”

The YES school has had an impact on both the school and higher education systems. The school was originally meant only for adults with a background of drug abuse. But soon neighbouring schools asked if youngsters with difficulties in the ordinary school system could also apply to YES. This was agreed, and has been a success. A course on these principles is now to be piloted in the nearby town of Södertälje – a sort of ‘Basta in the city’. From a pedagogical point of view, both teachers and pupils appreciate this wide-ranging mixture of ages and experiences.

The experience has also fed into the higher education system. The University of Lund has created a special three-week course for student social workers, during which they meet, discuss and listen to lectures from different groups of marginalised people such as long-term unemployed people, drug users, psychiatric patients and people with various physical disabilities. The course has become very popular, as trainee social worker Sara Svensson testifies: “This has been the most exciting part of the whole

course. Why does it come at the end of our three years of university education? Meeting former social services clients has given me an insight into the importance of always treating people with respect, even if I don’t agree with their demands.”

The learning has been capitalised through a number of evaluation and scientific documents concerning social mobilisation and social enterprises. Researchers at the University of Lund have produced three evaluation documents. The first study concerns the creation of the new Basta-Väst social enterprise. The second evaluates the processes of using empowerment based pedagogic methods with people who dislike traditional schools. The third looks at the position of women, who make up only a seventh of Basta’s members.

STRAIGHT TO THE TOP – A EUROPEAN QUALIFICATION

EFF has a relatively high transnational profile. With its partners abroad, it has created a one-year university course aimed at adults who have been marginalised because of their lack of a basic school education. The course teaches how to manage third sector organisations in a more efficient and businesslike manner, and combines distance learning with modules taught at



Cook, welder, roofer... Rickard Sörelid reroofs a house at Alingsås

universities in Lund, London, Paris and Murcia. Twenty students from Britain, France, Spain and Sweden have so far passed their exams and were awarded their certificates by the Vice Chancellor of the University of East London in April 2005. "We think it's quite an achievement that our three students from Sweden completed a university course taught in English even though they previously hadn't even finished secondary school," says Kristina Blixt.

In its transnational work, Basta successfully showcased its commitment to empowerment. "We send our members to the transnational meetings, which amazes some of the other partners, who have a more hierarchical approach," Kristina comments. In return, Basta picked up some potentially useful business ideas, such as printing. "We also need to think about offering a wider range of therapeutic services," she adds. "At Basta, if you use drugs, you are out. But Diagrama in Spain, which has 600 employees, has the scale to offer services such as night shelters, so there is something for people at all stages."

To carry the change through to the European level, EFF and its partners have created an international social enterprise. Called ECCO (European Community co-operative Observatory), it will operate as a consultancy firm at European level. One service under development in the second round of EQUAL is consultancy in the new EU member states on starting up new social enterprises. Another idea is to develop a European franchising operation in the maintenance of parks and green spaces. Its partners bring together a complementary range of expertise from France (Pollen), Italy (Job Agreement), Spain (Proyecto Ulises) and the UK (Thames Gateway). In the second round of EQUAL, Hungary is joining the team.

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stories" are available
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