Tackling health inequalities in Sweden: An overview

Key points

The Swedish government continues to embark on a number of measures and interventions to enhance the health of the population by strengthening the public health work at various levels. The Swedish National Institute of Public Health (SNIPH) has compiled a number of important on going public health events, activities and initiatives which have an impact on the government work of tackling health inequalities and social determinants of health in Sweden. The list is not exhaustive but captures significant efforts made at national, regional and local levels. Our compilation includes:

1. Reforms in the areas of public health, health care, social services as proposed by the government inquiry on health care and social services
2. The government strategy regarding efforts and measures to combat the use of alcohol, narcotics, tobacco, and other illicit drugs (2011 – 2015)
3. Government strategy to enhance the wellbeing of people with various disabilities (2011 – 2016): Assessing and monitoring the health situation of people with various disabilities
5. The Public Health Convention, April 2012
6. Following up implementation of recommendations in the Public Health Policy Report 2010
7. The Swedish National Institute of Public health role in regulation, adversary and inspection of the use of Alcohol, Narcotics, Drugs, Tobacco and other illicit drugs and toxic substances
8. Improving the health of elderly people
9. Supporting interventions to prevent the use of alcohol, narcotics, tobacco, gambling and other illicit drugs through allocation of financial grants
10. Interventions to promote children and youth health
11. Promoting healthy lifestyles in the population
12. Other activities, at national, regional and local levels:
   - Sweden: Taking part in the Joint Action on health inequalities
   - Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions
     Joint Action for social sustainability – Reduce health inequalities
   - Commission for a socially sustainable Malmö, also called Malmö Commission
   - Västra Götaland Region
News: reforms in the areas of public health, health care, social services

- At the beginning of 2011, the government set up an inquiry to assess how state agencies in the fields of public health, health care, social services could be more effective, efficient and adapted to modern challenges.

- The inquiry group submitted its final report in mid-May. It proposes a new institutional structure in the areas of public health, health care, social services based on four main tasks:
  1. Knowledge that supports successive improvement efforts in the mentioned areas
  2. Regulation and Supervision to ensure an acceptable quality to all providers
  3. Infrastructure for IT and communication
  4. Long-term strategic management

- This implies that twelve states agencies which had previously been working with above issues will be replaced by four new states agencies according to the above stipulated tasks.
  1. The knowledge Agency for Public Health, Health Care and Social Services
  2. The Inspectorate of Public Health, Health Care and Social Services
  3. The Infrastructure Agency for Public Health, Health Care and Social Services
  4. The Agency for Welfare Strategy

- The government will call upon all interested parties (government agencies, civil society, etc…) to provide their views on the inquiry’s recommendations. This consultation process is part of the Swedish democratic values.

- If not unforeseen circumstances, the new agencies are expected to be in place and functional by January 2014. In the meantime, the government will establish a committee which will ensure the transition period.

- So far are the inquiry’s recommendations applauded and positively received among various stakeholders. The government reforms will contribute to significant savings, improved quality, productivity and efficiency of the system. With the new organizational structure Public health issues will be mainstreamed and addressed appropriately and thoroughly.

- A summary of the inquiry’s recommendations and work (in English) can be found at:
  http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/19/28/99/2eaebcbd.pdf
The government strategy regarding efforts and measures to combat the use of alcohol, narcotics, tobacco, and other illicit drugs (2011 – 2015)

The government has endorsed a strategy to enhance efforts and measures to fight against the use of alcohol, narcotics, tobacco and other illicit drugs. The overall objective of the strategy is to fight against social and medical alcohol related damages. Reduce the use of tobacco, promote and strive for a society free from the use of illicit drugs. The strategy will strengthen and enable coordination of the efforts made at societal various levels to prevent the use of alcohol, narcotics, tobacco and other illicit drugs. More focus will be put on interventions and efforts aimed at:

1. Protection of children and youth
2. Preventive measures and interventions
3. Implementation of early interventions
4. Care and Treatment
5. Developing suitable guidelines to facilitate international cooperation on these issues
6. Developing methods, knowledge, adequate indicators to enable monitoring and evaluation of the work carried out within the strategy

Government strategy to enhance the wellbeing of people with various disabilities (2011 – 2016): Assessing and monitoring the health situation of people with various disabilities

The Swedish National Institute of Public Health on the government’s request has been mandated to assess, monitor and follow up the health of people with various disabilities. This is part of the government strategy to enhance the wellbeing of people with various disabilities. The recent health assessment has shown that people with various disabilities have poor health compared to the majority of the population. The assessment is based on health determinants factors among people with various disabilities. This poor health is considered to be avoidable. There is a correlation between risky lifestyles and poor health among people with various disabilities.

The public health convention

- In April 2012, the Swedish Institute of Public Health (SNIPH) organized a public health convention. The last convention was held for nine years ago. The convention which lasted during three days was attended by a large number of public health actors at local, regional and national levels (nearly 1000 participants). International speakers also participated in the convention. The general themes discussed at the convention were:
1. What are future challenges for public health (with a healthy and ageing population)?
2. Striving for a good health, whose responsibility?
3. How can society contribute to and facilitate healthy choices among the population?
4. How can we build a society which improves health and sustainable development?
5. What are the required necessary interventions and measures to enable health for all and why?
6. How do we use limited resources effectively?

- In his opening speech at the convention the minister of health and social affairs Göran Hägglund, outlined important key factors which are primordial for future preventive and promotional interventions and measures:
  1. Empowering people to make healthy choices
  2. Joint responsibility between the state, civil society and the private sector
  3. Determine a clear role for healthcare systems in preventive/promotional measures and interventions
  4. Develop and enhance the modern technology to ease and enable people to take part actively in preventive/promotional interventions

- In her communication, associate professor Sarah Wamala, director general of the Swedish National Institute of Public Health gave an overview of the state of situation regarding public health in Sweden. Although Sweden continues to be among leading countries in the world with a healthy population, health inequalities among different groups in the society are apparent. People with low education, people with low income, and people with various disabilities lagged behind and often report poor health in comparison with majority people. Worth to note is the increasing of obesity and the fact that it is now more frequent that few young people do finish junior high school with required grades to high school. However it is pleasing to note the progress and development of public health interventions and measures at national, regional and local levels. Evidence based knowledge is the key to a successful and effective public health work. The institute has been assigned with two governmental inquiries on how the GRADE system can be applied in public health interventions and measures in Sweden.

- The minister of children and elderly Maria Larsson pointed out the importance of having a common vision to improve elderly health. The key to healthy aging is the healthy lifestyle choices. The minister acclaimed the efforts made within a project called “health coaches” carried out by the Swedish National Institute of Public Health. The project is implemented in collaboration with 16 municipalities and four regional councils. The aim of the project is to improve healthy ageing among the population through healthy lifestyles. “Health coaches” are trained to inspire and motivate elderly people to make healthy choices (physical activities,
increased participation in one’s daily life, healthy food, promoting meeting places for elderly people)

- The lessons learnt from the public health convention are:
  1. Increased interests in public health work at national, regional and local levels
  2. The convention was an important forum for exchange of ideas and experiences between various actors

Following up implementation of recommendations in the public health policy report 2010

Since 2005, the Institute of Public Health issues a public health policy report as part of its mandate to monitor and evaluate the implementation of public health policy. An assessment of the public health situation is conducted with special focus on social health determinants. Recommendations on how to improve the public health work based on the results in the PHPR are also made and presented to the government for action.

Among 60 recommendations outlined in the public health political report in November 2010, half of the recommendations have been implemented by April 2012. This is a clear indication of the government commitment to enhance the public health work.

The Swedish National Institute of Public Health role in regulation, advisory, inspection, monitoring of the use of Alcohol, Narcotics, Drugs, Tobacco and other illicit drugs and toxic substances

The Swedish National Institute of Public Health has an important role regarding regulation, advisory, inspection and monitoring of the use of Alcohol, Narcotics, Drugs, Tobacco and other illicit drugs. The institute plays a major role in the classification of toxic substances and other hazardous chemicals and their health effects and exposure risks. The institute provides scientific data and information and guidelines to relevant actors in these areas.

In Sweden the sale of alcohol is restricted. For example it is mandatory to pass an examination on knowledge on alcohol, damages related to alcohol before one can be granted a license to open a pub or restaurant where alcohol will be sold. The institute in collaboration with relevant actors is involved in organizing such courses.

Improving the health of elderly people

The Swedish Institute of Public Health in collaboration with the National Board of Health and Social Welfare have developed a guidelines portal on how to promote healthy aging. The portal contains information on best practices and knowledge on methods that promote healthy lifestyles among elderly people. The aim of the guidelines portal is to inspire and enable access to information for
actors at various levels (the civil society, municipalities, and regional councils) working with elderly people.

A strategy of Roma inclusion (2012 – 2032)

- In February 2012, the Swedish parliament endorsed a strategy for Roma inclusion (2012 - 2032). The strategy stretches over a period of 20 years. The government has outlined six areas which are pivotal to improve the Roma people living conditions and welfare. They are:
  - Education
  - Work
  - Housing
  - Health
  - Culture and language
  - Strengthening the Roma civil society

- The strategy is based on proposed actions to improve the wellbeing of Roma people in Sweden as presented by the Delegation for Roma Issues in its final report to the Government Roma Rights- A strategy for Roma in Sweden (SOU: 2010:55)
- The government has allocated 46 million for the implementation of the strategy
- The Delegation for Roma Issues endorsed all the proposed actions presented by the Swedish National Institute of Public Health as adequate measures to improve the situation of Roma people
- The Swedish National Institute of Public Health has a central role in the implementation of the Swedish National Strategy for Roma Inclusion (contribution to the training of culture competent advisors, assessing the health Roma women as well as following up the health of Roma people from a public health perspective)

Supporting interventions to prevent the use of alcohol, narcotics, tobacco, gambling and other illicit drugs through allocation of financial grants

As part of the government’s strategy to prevent the use of alcohol, narcotics, tobacco, other illicit drugs and gambling. The institute will at the government behest allocate grants to a number of active actors such as the civil society, municipalities, regional councils and research institutions.
Interventions to promote children and youth health

- The Swedish National Institute of Public Health has been commissioned by the Government in its campaign to promote children and youths health to allocate grants to municipalities and research institutions for developing adequate tools for good parenting. Lessons learnt and experiences from this work are being spread further to key actors at national, regional and local levels.

The Swedish National Institute of Public Health has been mandated by the government to develop, support and strengthen the work aimed at children in risky environments (vulnerable children). Children in risky environments are children who risk to be subjected or exposed to damages during pregnancy, children subjected to or are at risk to be subjected to various abuses, children with psychological illnesses, children and youth living in dysfunctional families with different abuses, children who witness violence, children whose parents suffer from psychological illnesses, or have parents with any form of disabilities. The institute will allocate financial grants to support actors who are working with preventive and promotional interventions in these areas at different levels. The institute will also do a literature review of scientific knowledge and evidence based methods in the area. An inventory of experiences on how local actors work with these issues will be also conducted as well as an assessment of how healthcare services address and handle issues related to children in risk environments. This work will jointly be carried out in collaboration with the National Board of Health and Welfare and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. This work is part of the government strategy regarding efforts and measures to combat the use of alcohol, narcotics, tobacco, and other illicit drugs (2011 – 2015).

Promoting healthy lifestyles in the population

The Swedish National Institute of Public health has been commissioned by the government to coordinate and carry out a campaign to improve and promote healthy lifestyles:

A Healthy Sweden Campaign 2010-2012, the aims of the campaign are to:

- Promote and stimulate physical activities among the entire population and with special focus to vulnerable groups in the society.

- Enhance and promote good lifestyle behaviors such as healthy eating behaviors.
The campaign was launched in 2010 and more than 1000 activities have been carried out including spreading of information by various actors in the field of public health at the local and national levels. Last year, 3000 activities were carried out by more than 1000 actors. This year activities are centered on promoting biking and walking to schools. An evaluation of the campaign shall be conducted to analyze the effects of the campaign on people’s lifestyle and behaviors regarding physical activities.

Other activities

The institute has participated in the consultation on the new European Policy for Health – Health 2020.

Taking part in the Joint Action on health inequalities

The institute takes part in work package 4”Promoting a health equity focus in policy making tools” in Joint Action on Health Inequalities. The institute has participated in a training programme for partners on Health Impact Assessment with an equity focus. The institute is currently conducting a HIA on tobacco recommendations outlined in the public health policy report 2010. External key actors in the area are involved in the process.

**Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions**

Joint Action for social sustainability – Reduce health inequalities

The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions along with 20 municipalities, county councils, and regions have formed a Joint Action for social sustainability to reduce health inequalities. Its purpose is to determine the most important areas for actions and measures and the most important actors for these areas that could have an impact on reducing health inequalities.

Recently the Swedish Association of Local Authorities organized a national conference on how to tackle health inequalities as well as enhance equality and equity in welfare various services. Methods such as open comparisons which enable actors at various levels to improve their work in access and service delivery were also discussed. Sir Michael Marmot was a guest of honour at the conference.

**Commission for a socially sustainable Malmö, also called Malmö Commission**

The commission was set up in 2010 and its main task is to compile evidence based knowledge and strategies for reducing health inequalities and improve the long term living conditions for the citizens
of Malmö especially for the most vulnerable and the disadvantaged. The commission is made up of 11 commissioners.

According to the commission, in some parts of Malmö, people live nearly seven years longer than in other parts of the city. Known causes behind this discrepancy in life expectancy and health are lack of fundamental conditions for good health, such as work, education, acceptable housing conditions and economic and social resources.

During 2012, the commission has organized a number of seminars, conferences and consultation meetings on children’s health, segregation and its impact on the health of vulnerable groups, the health situation of children living in vulnerable families (economically and socially), Assessing the costs caused by social inequalities in the city of Malmö.

**Västra Götaland Region**

Västra Götaland Region takes part in the work package 5 in Joint Action on Health Inequalities. This work package focuses mainly on what works at a regional level with regard to addressing health inequalities. The region is involved in a framework developed to identify what works at regional level (practices and policies) with special focus on evaluation, governance, policy, stakeholders and the use of HIAs. The public health committee in Västra Götaland has initiated a project to develop a regional public health model with municipalities in the region and a guideline for equal health for all in Västra Götaland. The aim of these initiatives is to tackle health inequalities and improve the health situation of people especially in segregated and vulnerable areas in Västra Götaland.

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