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The Swedish Research Service – its organisation and implementation of new guidelines

The aim with this paper is to describe the present organization of the Swedish Research Service with particular focus on the new services provided by the function for follow-up, evaluation, research and future.

Background

In 1955 the Riksdag set up an information service attached to the Riksdag Library whose task was to provide support for members in the parliamentary and democratic process. As the demands made on political decision-makers have grown, the role and activities of the research service have also changed. The number of requests received, as well as their complexity has increased, and since the mid-1960s the Riksdag Research Service has been an independent department within the Riksdag Administration. In order to bring the Research Service closer to the decision making process, the department was, in 2000, given its current organisational position as part of the Secretariat of the Chamber.

Present organisation

The Research Service is organised in three sections, and a special function. The three sections are each responsible for a number of subject areas; The section for economy analysis (EA- section) is responsible for analysis in areas such as the economic policy, financial markets and energy policy. The EA-section also calculates of the effects of different political proposals. The areas of responsibility for the welfare section (V-section) include labour market, social issues, education migration, culture etc. The section for law and politics (F-section) is responsible for law, public administration, the democratic process, foreign and security policy and environmental issues. The three sections are roughly of equal size, having all together around 40 qualified researchers with various specialisations, including law, economics, political science and sociology.

The special function, established 2002, has the task of supporting the Riksdag committees in their follow-up and evaluation of previous Riksdag decisions. Since 2006 its task also includes work with research and future issues. Four evaluators are responsible for follow-up and evaluation and two senior research advisors for research and future issues.

Research in the three sections

The research is generally done on assignment. This means that the commissioning member or party secretariat, in consultation with the relevant researcher, determines what problems, issues are under investigation and the time frame of an assignment. In principle, the commissioning party has exclusive rights to the report provided and determines the extent to which the material will be made more generally available.

The Research Service receives approximately 2,500 research requests each year. Over 90 per cent of the requests come from Riksdag members and party secretariats in the Riksdag, but requests are also made by the Riksdag Administration, and parliaments in other countries.

As a supplement to its assignment-driven activities, the Research Service also endeavours on its own initiative to study topical issues and publish reports on them. The Research Service also regularly publishes key facts and figures on the Swedish economy. However, the principal work is to answer to the requests from MPs and party secretariats.

New Guidelines

The Riksdag has devoted considerable attention in recent years to finding methods to develop its work with democracy. The general objective is that parliament and its committees will obtain high-quality background materials in order to set correct priorities and better be able to assess the resources required to achieve politically determined targets. When the members of the Riksdag and parliamentary committees consider Government bills, written communications and private members' motions, they should be acquainted with the outcome of previous decisions taken by the Riksdag. This is to be achieved through follow-up and evaluation. In 2001 and 2006, the Riksdag adopted guidelines for the follow-up and evaluation by the parliamentary committees. According to the Riksdag's guidelines, follow-up and evaluation are to become a natural part of the activities of all committees. Follow-up and evaluation as a task for the committees has also been written into the Riksdag Act.

Follow-up and evaluation is to be included in the Committees' regular processing of business and can either be thematic or ongoing. The committees' thematic follow-up and evaluation activities normally concern larger initiatives to build up the knowledge base in connection with Riksdag deliberation. The committees' ongoing follow-up activities include assessing targets and target statements as part of their consideration of the Budget Bill, and analyzing information provided by the Government about results in relation to targets set by the Riksdag.

In June 2006, while new guidelines for follow-up and evaluation were adopted, the Riksdag also adopted new guidelines for the Riksdag to begin working more systematically, and with a higher level of ambition, with issues related to research and the future. This means that all committees will now have the opportunity to conduct at least one research review per

electoral period, in which Swedish and international research within their respective areas of responsibility is presented. Also, the committees are to cooperate in initiating joint analyses of the future and technology assessments. The Riksdag's work with issues relating to the future should largely take place on a cross-committee level. The work with research and future also involve developing national and international networks in the field. An improved communication and transfer of knowledge between researchers and members of the Riksdag is important. International parliamentary cooperation in the fields of research and future studies is also set up to be developed.

The function for follow-up, evaluation, research and future

The new guidelines are to be implemented within the Riksdag's regular organisation why the committees and committee secretariats need to take considerable responsibility. However, in response to the expanded demand of support to the committees, the special function at the Research Service has been established. The function supports the parliamentary committees, both in their follow-up, evaluation and the research and future activities. The function also has a special responsibility to serve as a motor in the general development of committee activities and to generate cross-committee activities.

Special funds have been earmarked for the work with follow-up, evaluation, research and future. These funds can be used to employ researchers and other experts, to carry out background materials or to write research overviews and perform in depth analysis of certain themes.

Results achieved and examples of best practices

In the spring of 2006 an internal group at the Riksdag was engaged to implement the decision taken in the beginning of 2006 concerning the follow-up, evaluation, research and future. The working group pointed out that experience of the implementation after the Riksdag decision taken 2002 shows that a gradual realisation of the new guidelines has had advantages. The support to the Committees' work with follow-up and evaluation has been built up in line with the demand from the committees. The gradual build-up has also enabled the Riksdag Administration to adapt the direction of the support to the different needs of the Committees in various situations.

Follow-up and evaluation

The work with follow-up and evaluation has continued to develop and it has expanded substantially during the last years. The function has now the capability to perform several large projects with internal resources. It has been shown that there are advantages to perform projects at the function instead of using external experts. The dialogue with, as well as MPs and the employees at the Committee secretariats, is facilitated as the evaluation is performed by employees at the function. Also, the possibility to assist the Committee secretariat with the preparation of the final product is enhanced when internal resources are used. However, for certain projects, special competences are needed and external experts are consulted.

The employees that are hired at the function are characterized by a long and substantial background of evaluation, and a capability to independently conduct and lead evaluations. Experience from various policy areas and from work in a politically led organization are also a key presumptions for the work.

Gradually, an increasing number of projects have been led by steering groups with MPs from the different Committees where the function has had the task to assist in planning, conducting and finalizing projects. The extension of time to conduct a thematic follow-up and evaluation varies and is on average six months. Experience shows that it is important to conduct a pre-study as it gives the Committee the possibility to decide on the direction of the continuing work in the main study. During 2007, the function assisted in 8 projects within various fields and examples of two projects are; Evaluation of the results of the correctional intake treatment – the situation for women respective men and Evaluation of the results and consequences of political efforts within the area of fisheries.

During 2007 the function has assisted in two running projects within the field of responsibility of the Committee on Environment and Agriculture a work led by a group of MPs within the Committee. The objective was to analyze the report by the Government in the state budget for 2008 concerning the results of efforts by the state within the field of fisheries and food stuff and the efforts within the sea environment. The work resulted in a statement from the parliament to the government on how changes in reporting results should be undertaken the forthcoming year.

Research and Future

Hearings and seminars

During the past year the proportion of research content in the committee hearings during 2007 has increased significantly. With support from the function, a *Future Day* was organised in January 2008. Eleven committees acted as hosts for three themes, *Climate change*, *An elderly population* and *Information Technologies in the Future*. Three to four committees were responsible for each theme and a panel with 2 MPs from each committee had the possibility to form the program. At each seminar, researchers and experts presented future scenarios which were later discussed together with the MPs. An evaluation of the Future Day gave overall good results. Positive comments were given for the interdisciplinary themes and having panels with MPs from several committees which stimulated the discussion over the Committee borders. However, the event required a considerable part of resources, personnel as well as financial. In the future, a similar event may be split up into several smaller seminars dealing with future issues engaging three to four committees at each occasion.

Research overviews – Inventory of research areas

Overviews have been performed for the Committee on taxation and the Committee on Defence in order to present ongoing research within their area of responsibility. These overviews inform the MPs of current

research, which can be useful for future hearings. Also, later this year, the Research Bill will be handled in all Committees and overviews such as these can be helpful when handling the Bill.

Research overviews - Technology assessments

On behalf of the Committee on Transport and Communications a technology assessment (TA) has been done on renewable fuels with the aim to increase the knowledge base in the field and to present future scenarios. Two experts in the field were employed during three months to write the TA. The final product was presented and debated at a hearing during the spring and has subsequently been used in debates in the chamber and in committee reports. The committee will also use the TA when handling the coming infrastructure bill in the end of the year.

The Process

The involvement of MPs in the work with research overviews has been an important part in the process. The technology assessment (TA) on renewable fuels was handled by an internal reference group with seven MPs, one from each party, from the Committee on Transport and Communication. They acted as a steering group and met up with the authors to comment and discuss the content of the TA. An external group with seven experts from universities and public authorities also read, commented and met up for a discussion on the content and conclusions of the TA. The expert group was consulted in order to validate and secure the quality of the work. A public hearing was organized to debate the TA where the two authors initiated the hearing with a presentation, three experts commented on the overview adding some complementary views such as the conflict between production of fuel and food. After the presentations, a discussion between MPs, authors, seminar holders and invited from various organizations discussed the TA. In the final report, the written discussion was added as an appendix.

Conclusions

Since the beginning of 2000, the major changes at the Swedish Research Service include the additional tasks with follow-up and evaluation and a more systematic work with issues related to research and future. The work with follow-up and evaluation has expanded substantially the recent years. The more systematic work with research and future issues has now been ongoing for a year and the proportion of research content in Committee hearings has increased substantially. In order to continue to develop the working forms, a group with representatives from Riksdag Library, Information Service and the Swedish research council meet regularly. Also, international contacts have been taken with other parliaments, and organizations carrying out technology assessments, in order to learn from others with a long experience in the field.