

Cooperative development in Sweden

25 cooperativ agencies called Coompanion in Sweden

In the cooperative several people share the work, responsibilities and hardships – and the joy too of course. To promote cooperative development in Sweden there are 25 cooperative development agencies, called Coompanion in existence. They form a support structure of around 100 professional advisers combining knowledge about broad social needs and small business requirements with unique competence in regards to democratic entrepreneurship and local development in rural sparsely populated areas as well as the urban areas. The focal point for the advisory service, information and training courses of the development agencies is people and their own solutions such as, joint enterprises in the public, private and voluntary sector. The development agencies offer free information and advice. The state is providing half the funding for this service – about SEK 30 million per year – and local and regional stakeholders finance the other half.

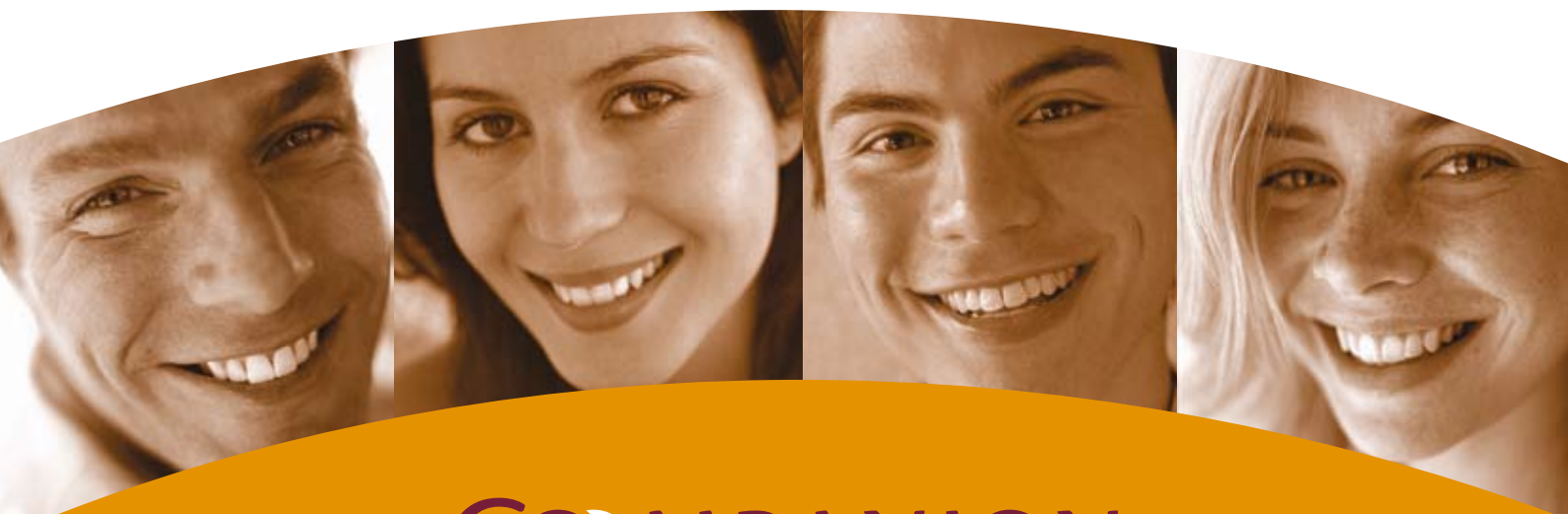
Contact Coompanion

Do not hesitate to contact us.

On www.coompanion.se you find your nearest office.

Needs and solutions

The starting point for the Cooperative Development Agencies is current public issues and needs, such as: a widened labour market, occupational health, sustainable growth, local development, an ageing population, ageing entrepreneurs, the low number of new businesses, enterprise thresholds, the reductions in the public sector, young people's values as well as poorly functioning markets, such as the electricity and banking markets. In real terms, we may be talking about employment opportunities for individuals with a reduced mental and physical capacity for work, pre-schools and schools, the starting up and running of IT-companies and other knowledge companies, collaboration between small businesses in marketing, preventive health care, rural tourism, medical clinics, care for the elderly and enterprises within health care, wind power, save the village store and others. The following examples are solutions that the development agencies can help realize: social enterprises, cooperatives for the elderly, cooperation in school, personnel cooperatives, hiving off and take-overs, user/consumer cooperatives, company collaboration, non-traditional financing solutions and so called platform companies.



COOMPANION

Non-traditional entrepreneurs

A large part of the people the cooperative advisers meet can be described as non-traditional entrepreneurs. They may come from roles of being employed in the private or public sector, unemployed, consumers, users of health and/or care services, parents, relatives, on long-term sick leave, residents in a rural or city area. There is an increase in the demand for cooperative advice from people with a background in other cultures than the Swedish one. This applies, for example, to the starting up of pre-schools and care for the elderly. Furthermore, many groups that the development agencies meet are predominated by women. Often, the issue also concerns non-traditional activities. This requires extensive mobilization and development work. The advisers inform, give advice and train, but it is the joint company owners that start the cooperative enterprise.

Entrepreneurship

An important task of the development agencies is to tackle attitudes to and knowledge of entrepreneurship. It is about the readiness and ability of people to meet common needs through joint enterprising. The goal is to get more people to realize their ideas and start or develop companies.

Local development

There are great expectations of the efforts made by the development agencies for local and regional development. They often play an important part in the local development support structure. The obvious starting point is the local community. The development agencies participate in European, national and communal efforts to stimulate growth and local development. They are often involved in the work of meeting the needs being identified in regional plans for development and growth. Even the regional financing, from local authorities and county councils, shows that the development agencies' regional anchorage is strong.

Democracy

The spirit of cooperative enterprising is, to a high degree, an expression for what is with a current term called, "the spirit of co-creating". It is entrepreneurship in a democratic form with a joint shouldering of responsibilities and practical public commitments. One of the tasks of the cooperative advisers is to support the development of a working democracy within every activity. This work is educational in an empowering sense and democracy strengthening.



Social economy

A way to organise social economy is to start a cooperative enterprise. The overall objective of the business activity is its usefulness and the people in the cooperative are brought together by their common needs. The Cooperative Development Agencies contribute to the rising importance of the social economy as a phenomenon and concept. They especially strive to strengthen the importance of the social economy as a breeding ground for economic growth. In EU programmes cooperative companies and voluntary organisations are seen as important participants through the role they play for the social economy. The Cooperative Development Agencies very often act as representatives for the social economy both locally and regionally in these programmes and projects. At the same time they have an assembling role for the social economy participants.

It has got to take time

The target groups and fields of activities of the development agencies depend on the long-term view. Inexperienced and non-traditional entrepreneurs need more time than others to succeed. The cooperative advisers often have to act as supervisors during long mobilization and development processes involving many people.

Not just cooperatives

The development agencies work with small businesses, innovative forms and non-traditional groups of entrepreneurs. This requires a broad repertoire of possible solutions in information and advising. The focus is set on sound companies and organisations, which means that development agencies



also support the creation of another form of association than the economic association, for example a limited company or a voluntary organisation, when a mobilization and starting-up process goes that way. It sometimes happens that voluntary organisations, foundations, projects or networks lack any other source of support for development or operation.

Competence

The Cooperative Development Agencies offer both broad and specific competence, the capacity to accept commissions as well as the experience of managing projects. They provide a wider service than many other advisory organisations. They often have to deal with cases that other advisers cannot cope with, or view as difficult. The cooperative advisers are experienced and committed with a deep knowledge about the prerequisites and conditions for small businesses. They combine this with unique knowledge about cooperative business advising and the social economy. A growing special field is to support people, who because of disabilities or other reasons find themselves outside the labour market, to organise meaningful and productive work. The advisers have extensive knowledge about the problems arising in the stepping from being dependent on the system of social insurance to becoming an entrepreneur. Moreover, they are very competent when it comes to the change of management forms within the public sector. The method of work the cooperative advisers use is outreaching, mobilizing, problem solving, process orientated and educational.





Collaboration and networks

The Cooperative Development Agencies cooperate on a wide scale with other participants, local authorities, county councils and the regional government bodies as well as organisations and industry. Very often they act as initiators and assembling force in networks and partnerships of varying styles and purposes. They also represent the new cooperation and the social economy in structural fund activities, the regional development work and other networks and collaborations. They collaborate with other business advisers and promoters, not least ALMI Business Partner. The various “customer groups” and fields of competence enable them to complement each other and cooperate for best use of resources. The task of developing networks, joint action groups and partnerships with organisations and public bodies has grown increasingly large. To the development agencies, this stands to reason and is a necessity as they are small organisations in need of co-participants, legitimacy and position, as well as contracts and “customers”.

Information and the sharing of knowledge

The development agencies run courses, seminars, information meetings, study visits and study trips whilst also participating in events organised by others. They also produce information, guidance and training material such as magazines, news sheets, books, publications and films. A lot of this is published jointly by the development agencies or together with other organisations.

Levelling the ground

An important task and an important purpose of the work are to facilitate and improve the terms for cooperative and similar enterprising. That also includes efforts such as, improving access to capital and attitude changing activities to increase the legitimacy and status of those starting up an enterprise.

Organisational and business development

An increasing demand for advice to and training of members, employees and elected representatives in active enterprises are directed towards the Cooperative Development Agencies. It concerns issues like leadership, organisation, committee work, employer responsibilities and finances. The development agencies are working with, among others, the providing of good examples.

Programmes

Most Cooperative Development Agencies are actively involved in the regional programmes for economic growth, local projects for local development and entrepreneurship as well as the EU structural funds programmes. Many of them are commissioned to act as an intermediary organisation or coordinator of a working group within the structural funds programmes.

International cooperation

The Cooperative Development Agencies are involved in an extensive international exchange. Many participate in transnational EU projects. A natural transfer of knowledge in areas where Sweden lies ahead takes place in these projects. Not least, the transfer of the Swedish model of Cooperative Development Agencies, for which there is a large interest, to the new EU member states.



COMPANION

The Swedish Association of Cooperative Development Agencies - Coompanion

1994 the Cooperative Development Agencies together formed the Swedish Association of Cooperative Development Agencies, CDA. Through CDA they run a joint method and business development, competence development, opinion forming, information as well as social and political monitoring and lobbying. The association organises and also develops the internal communication of the development agencies and their sharing of experiences. Since 1999 the Swedish Association of Cooperative Development Agencies - Coompanion, has published the journal Social Ekonomi (Social Economy) issued 4 times a year, and is also running an Internet website about Coompanion, cooperation and social economy www.coompanion.se

Government support

Since the mid-eighties the government supports a development of small cooperative enterprises by providing funding to the Cooperative Development Agencies. Since 2002, funding can also be provided to develop other forms of enterprising than cooperatives within the social economy. The Swedish Business Development Agency, NUTEK manages the government



funding. The government finances a maximum of half of the free information and advisory service run by a development agency. For 2004, NUTEK also has SEK 9 million at their disposal for other work. The money is, among other things, used for the competence development of cooperative advisers and to support projects that, in various ways, promote a development of entrepreneurship within the social economy. The projects included issues such as, developing solutions for social economy funding, support structures for cooperatives for the elderly, social cooperatives, marginalized entrepreneur groups and young people as well as international cooperation and the use of new technology supporting cooperative development. NUTEK calls the Coompanion representatives to, as they are called, dialogue meetings at least four times a year.

The CDA:s 2003

Total number: 25. Total turnover: SEK 65 million (Euro 7.2 million). Total number of employees: 87, women men 48/39. Total number of CDA members: 882 - of which new cooperatives 500 - their total turnover SEK 900 million (Euro 100 million). Government funding to cooperative development SEK 30 million (Euro 3.3 million).

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