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The Importance of Belonging Finland-Swedes and Their Associations

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It seems to be a deeply ingrained human trait to have a need to feel seen and appreciated. Most people enjoy feeling part of a community, where they can be around other, like-minded individuals and strive towards a common goal. This longing provides the impetus for many of society's associations. You can find that people gather to found associations for everything imaginable, from collecting stamps, and singing in choirs, to looking for UFOs, and even training rabbits to jump hurdles. Sometimes it does not really matter what you do, as long as you do it together.

Associations in Finland today

Today there are 138,000 associations registered in Finland (Finnish Patent and Registration Office 2016), out of which about 80,000 are active. Due to this, nearly 15 million people are registered in associations in Finland (Finnish Civil Society 2016), meaning that on average each Finn is a member of three associations. Needless to say, these associations have a significant influence on society. Today, a great deal of responsibility is placed on associations to manage different aspects of society within fields such as culture, sports, and religion. It is often taken for granted that associations will provide services



The sense of belonging and the feeling of working for a common goal is important to most people.

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in society, without recognizing that this does not just happen on its own, but rather through countless hours of voluntary work. Considering today's stressful pace of life, what happens if people no longer feel that associations are a priority? How will society move forward if we take all this voluntary work for granted and forget to appreciate and reward the people who are passionate about their associations?

Hopefully, we will never get to the point where we need to answer those questions. Rather, the desirable solution would be to support said associations while they still exist. This is where the project *FöreningsKICK* (loosely translated as "Association Boost") comes into the picture. This is a two-year-long project undertaken by Centria UAS and Novia UAS currently taking place in Finland. The project has been funded by Leader (Aktion Österbotten), and its aim is to support associations as well as their maintenance and development in the Swedish-speaking regions of Ostrobothnia. This is done by arranging workshops, where people get to gather and network while actively working with developing

their own association, focusing on topics like strategy, internal communication, and marketing. As the universities running the project have conducted much research concerning the development of companies, the techniques developed are now applied to associations and their activities. The end result of the project will be a handbook for associations.

The uniqueness of Finland-Swedish togetherness

The importance of associations can be seen as a typical trait of Finland-Swedes. According to researcher Maria Bäck (2008), the most active participants of associations in Finland are found in Ostrobothnia, or the Swedish parts of Finland, and she claims that associations are important for the social unity among Finland-Swedes.

Currently, there are just over 290,000 Finland-Swedes in Finland (Statistics Finland 2015), which is slightly more than 5 percent of the population. Their language is unique, as it is not quite the same as the Swedish spoken in Sweden, and their culture is

unique, as it is not quite like the Finnish culture in Finland. Finland-Swedes are often very proud of their heritage, and want to be differentiated, not as Finns, not as Swedes, but as Finland-Swedes. Being in this unique situation means that many Finland-Swedes feel a certain con-

nection, and also feel that "we need to stick together" to maintain their common culture, language, and national standing. It is therefore not entirely surprising that the sense of togetherness is so important to Finland-Swedes.

Emigration and associations

Gathering in associations is in no way a new thing, but according to researcher Henrik Stenius "people have always been part of different kinds of associations" (1987). However, associations received a special boost in Finland in the 19th century. A major reason was the increased feeling of nationalism in a state under Russian control. This is also when more formal regulations for associations were introduced (Stenius 1987.) So why is it relevant to read about this in America? Perhaps it sheds some light on the American experience, since this time period is also known for the great wave of immigration into the USA. Between 1893 and 1924, approximately 300,000 people from Finland immigrated into the USA. Around 60,000 of these were Finland-Swedes. (Myhrman 1972.)

These immigrants brought with them their own culture and way of life, including the habit of gathering with like-minded people and working for a common cause. Finland-Swedes often lived close to each other and found a great deal of support in one another. Community was extremely important.



The project "FöreningsKICK" strives to help associations in Swedish-speaking Ostrobothnia prosper..

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A sauna is being built by voluntary workers during a talko day in Jakobstad, Finland.

When they started a new life in the new country, they continued working together much as they had in their old country. In Finland, *talko* is a word known by everyone. In old times the talko was particularly evident during the harvest season, but even today, people, and associations in particular, often use talko. It means a work party, where friends and neighbors gather to work together. The point with the work party is that you volunteer to help someone out by working for them, but you are not paid, nor are you in any debt of gratitude. You traditionally receive food for your work, but the only other pay is the feeling of having been useful and helped someone out in need, and having felt part of a community.

In addition to meeting up for work parties like these, many of the immigrants gathered in Lutheran congregations, but other forms of

social contact were also important. Even today, when American descendants think back on their older relatives, what they especially remember are the moments spent around the coffee table, discussing nothing and everything at the same time. The sense of belonging was very important to the first immigrants, and even today, the feeling of togetherness among that group of people is unique, with an excellent example seen in the association

SFHS, where Finland-

Swedish descendants still stick together.

Current challenges for associations in Finland

However important associations are in Finland, it is a fact that many of them are struggling. When the project "FöreningsKICK" began in June 2016, the hypothesis was that most associations are going through difficulties due to financial issues. After interviewing cultural secretaries and associations in Ostrobothnia, and reading the opinions of over 60 people responding to an online survey during the early autumn of 2016, it became clear that, while financial issues do indeed cause problems at times, most associations face challenges of a different nature. Naturally, the challenges are very specific to each association, but

some trends can be identified.

How can new members be recruited, and how does an association offer interesting tasks, but balance this with a light work load? Is too much expected perhaps? When working with FöreningsKICK, we have heard people say that it is hard to offer the little time they have, because they are made to feel guilty when they do not offer more time. In that case it might simply feel easier not to offer any help at all. Also, it might feel intimidating to join an association with a long history. Today, the generational shift presents a challenge.

How are the members activated? There is always a risk of having only a few people pull all the weight. With that, we come to issues of communication. Sometimes the workload is uneven due to communication difficulties. As earlier stated, a typical way of conduct in associations is to have talko

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Gathering around the coffee table to share traditional Finnish sweet rolls, or "bulla", was a social tradition that the emigrants made sure to keep in the new country.

days, which means that members gather for a work party. While the board might often be upset that people are not showing up to the talko, the members might not have received the information about the opportunity to help out. Speaking of communication, not only the members need to be reached, but, depending on the association, the public should be informed about events. Some associations need help with marketing. Where and how should the association be seen?

If we distinguish the one thing that is perhaps most essential for an association to function, which has caused more challenges than anticipated when this project was started, it is the need for joy and the feeling of being in it together. One association we talked to made clear that finances were not an issue. There was money in the association, but there was a lack of true belonging, caring, and sense of togetherness. Without the team spirit, an association will probably not survive in the long run, as the sense of belonging is one of the core reasons people are willing to volunteer. We have also seen several examples of how associations have flourished despite small resources, because the members have so much fun together that they put in an extra amount of effort to make things work out.

Is it possible that we are losing track of the uniqueness of the Finland-Swedish togetherness? Is today's stressful life and international lifestyle taking its toll on us? Let us hope that this is not the

case, or at least that there will come a time when we find our way back.

What does the future hold for associations?

According to professor Robert D. Putnam (2006), Americans' eagerness to do voluntary work in associations in the early 1900s has declined during the last few decades, and people are nowadays isolated individualists. This is a problem, since working together creates social capital, and makes people trust each other.

This year has been tumultuous for all Americans, seen from a political perspective. More than ever, it seems like people mistrust each other. Perhaps it is time to remember "the olden days" when the Finland-Swedish immigrants gathered around the coffee table and helped each other out where they could. This is something that we also need to remember in Finland. Why did associations begin forming in the first place? Because people believed in a common cause, had a common interest and wanted to work together. They wanted to belong. We still want to belong. We just need to prioritize in our stressful everyday lives and realize that voluntary work can provide us with joy that a salary cannot.

It is important to keep associations, the sense of belonging, and the feeling of working together alive. The question is how we make sure that associations survive and prosper. We need to make sure that we do not forget the reason why we

should be active in associations. We need to remember the joy and the sense of belonging, the core values that an association such as SFHS stands for.

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