

PERSPECTIVES

BY JONAS HELLMAN



CAN HARD LESSONS BE LEARNED FROM SWEDEN'S 'SOFT LOCKDOWN'?

Sweden's response to the coronavirus pandemic has attracted immense international attention. Critics have described it as 'laissez-faire' and suggested that the true purpose of letting the virus roam freely, although it is not stated as such, is to generate 'herd immunity' as quickly as possible. The idea, however, that the Swedish government would be willing to accept and effectively cause more deaths in the short term in order to reduce or eliminate the virus in the long term, puts conspiracy theory above common sense. The truth can be less exciting than fiction and in fact, the short-term objective in Sweden has been the same as that in most other countries: to 'flatten out the curve' in order to ensure that the health care system can continue to cope. Where Sweden differs from other countries is on enforcement. Other countries generally have imposed quarantine on their populations by force, whereas Sweden has opted for voluntary measures. In line with this, while the government still has the ultimate responsibility, in practice it is following the advice of the independent experts at Sweden's Public Health Agency who are overseeing the country's response to the outbreak.

Swedes stay at home voluntarily

Experts have argued thus far that the voluntary measures seem sufficient, and that they are more sustainable in the long run. Most primary schools, preschools, shops, restaurants, gyms and other businesses, therefore, have remained open during the pandemic. Even public transport continues to run. Nevertheless, it is not business as usual. Sweden is a country with a culture built on trust and, generally, people follow the recommendations of the Public Health Agency. Many are working from home and the government has also imposed certain restrictions. For instance, high schools and universities have switched to distance education and crowds of more than 50 people are no longer permitted. Restaurants and shops have been hit hard by the decreased consumption, but in contrast to other countries, there are no police in the streets preventing people from leaving their homes. In this respect, Sweden has remained more open than other countries and it is fair to call the Swedish approach a 'soft lockdown'.

Arguments supporting Sweden's approach

There are several arguments supporting the current Swedish strategy. For instance, a 'hard lockdown' would be impossible to maintain in the long run. It is better to teach the importance of social distancing

and handwashing, as well as taking measures that clearly make a difference in limiting the spread of infection.

According to the Public Health Agency, it is better to keep schools open in order to allow parents in the healthcare sector to keep working. Although other infectious diseases might spread among children, there are few indications that schools would be a major source of contagion for COVID-19. Indeed, given that medical staff are crucial for saving lives, closing the primary schools and preschools could even lead to more people dying.

More deaths in Sweden than in other Nordic countries

In Sweden, the support for continuing with a 'soft lockdown' is strong. At the same time, recent statistics of the number of deaths in Sweden compared to the other Nordic countries have raised concerns and doubts. At the time of writing, Sweden has registered 151 deaths from COVID-19 per million inhabitants, compared to 60 in Denmark, 28 in Norway and 17 in Finland (ECDC, April 20). These statistics might not be entirely reliable and comparable, but the difference in Sweden compared to its neighbors is striking. Various factors may have contributed to this gap, but it is obvious that Sweden's 'softer' approach has played a role.

A failure for Sweden is that many of the deaths have occurred in care homes for the elderly, even though an important part of the country's official strategy has been to protect precisely that population. There have been many reports about care workers for the elderly lacking adequate protection equipment. Critics also point out that Sweden failed to invest in increasing test capacity because the experts at the Public Health Agency initially did not consider it a priority.

Too early to evaluate

Several European countries have now begun to ease their restrictions, including Denmark, Norway and Finland. In practice, they are moving to rules and recommendations that are similar to Sweden's 'soft lockdown'. Some warn that this could potentially lead to more deaths in these countries as well, given the fact that fewer people have thus far been exposed to COVID-19. Sweden may have an advantage, considering that more people have become immune. These points, however, are mere speculation.

Sweden might have another advantage, however, in that its economy has been less hard hit than in neighboring countries. Recent statistics from the bank SEB show that card transactions in Sweden decreased by 30 percent during week 15 this year, compared to the same week a year ago. In Denmark, card transactions plummeted by 55 percent during the same period, and by 66 percent in Norway and 70 percent in Finland. This may not be enough to save the Swedish economy, but it still puts Sweden in a slightly better position than its neighbors.

More countries might adopt the same approach

Unfortunately, the pandemic is not over yet. More people will die and we need to prepare for a second and perhaps even a third wave of the infection. It is still too early to tell what the outcome of Sweden's more voluntary measures will be, and how these compare to the stricter measures that other countries have imposed.

Eventually, attention will shift towards the need to open up economies again. The economic and social costs of continuing to keep almost everything closed will simply be too high. This will likely increase the interest in the Swedish example, as more countries will need to follow a similar path.

Key takeaways:

1. **Voluntary measures can work to achieve social distancing.** In Sweden, at least, most people are following the government's recommendations. The infection has spread more rapidly than in other Nordic countries, but Sweden's 'soft' policy might not be the only explanation for this.

2. **The reality is not black or white.** The picture painted in other countries of Sweden allowing the infection to spread freely does not hold true. Death rates in Sweden may be higher to date than in several neighboring countries, but the worst fears have not been met.
3. **All strategies will need to be reviewed.** In the end, it is still a balancing act between slowing down the spread of infection and keeping the economy going. When both of these factors are considered together, the general perception in other countries of Sweden's 'soft lockdown' may be re-evaluated.

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