Civil Society's Role in Promoting Integration in Superdiverse Neighbourhoods Facing Socioeconomic Challenges in Sweden

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This policy brief draws on findings from ongoing projects exploring the role of civil society in superdiverse neighbourhoods facing socioeconomic challenges in Sweden. While previous research has often assumed a lack of civil society presence in these areas, this research challenges this assumption by documenting a wide range of both formal and informal civil society activities. Some findings are presented here with specific reference to civil society's integration-work and its methods of working.

Key Findings

- Civil society plays a key role in fostering integration through a wide range of needs-based and locally adapted activities by and for residents.
- Civil society activities tend to develop with identified needs and organisations and can therefore be described as multipurpose organisations as they organise different activities that have evolved over time.
- Civil society's integration work is often unrecognised and this research highlights the importance of supporting civil society's contributions as an important complement to the public sector in neighbourhoods facing socioeconomic challenges.

Policy Implications

- Civil society's strategic role for integration and inclusion needs to be acknowledged.
- There is a need to develop sustainable support mechanisms for funding, capacity-building, and collaborative platforms between different actors such as the municipalities, universities and businesses, to strengthen civil society's impact.

- Integration policies need to be informed by a local perspective, leveraging the knowledge and networks of civil society already operating in neighbourhoods and communitites.

Project Information

This policy brief builds on material from two projects *Rethinking Integration: A Comparative Mixed Methods Study of Civil Society Action in Superdiverse Neighbourhoods Facing Socioeconomic Challenges in Sweden* funded by the Swedish Research Council and *The role of civil society for employability and labour market participation in diverse areas: a comparative study of Sweden and the United Kingdom* funded by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare. Gabriella Elgenius (Professor, University of Gothenburg) is project leader for these projects and Juta Kawalerowicz (Senior Lecturer, Stockholm University) and Jenny Phillimore (Professor, University of Birmingham) are co-applicants.

Background and Purpose

Research on civil society in superdiverse neighbourhoods and areas facing socioeconomic challenges remains limited. Previous literature has even referred to diverse and deprived areas as lacking a civil society presence. This project challenges this assumption by investigating the scope and nature of civil society activity in conditions of socioeconomic challenge and superdiversity.

To address the knowledge gap, this research has employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative material to examine the work of both formally registered organisations and more informal unregistered initiatives— the latter being

frequently overlooked. The empirical material for this policy brief is drawn from the qualitative material collected with civil society representatives in five diverse neighbourhoods in Gothenburg and Stockholm. Comparative data is also available from two further neighbourhoods in Birmingham, UK. The large and unique dataset includes interviews with approximately 130 organisations and 200 civil society representatives.

Civil society is defined broadly to encompass all non-profit action conducted by associations, charities, charitable trusts, social enterprises and businesses that reinvest profits to promote say education, health or work. Civil society also includes smaller grassroot organisations completely run by volunteers and informal actor-networks or unregistered non-profit action. These informal efforts—such as homework support groups, women's networks and tenant-led activities —were identified by developing so called micro-mapping methodologies building on insights from previous studies (Soteri-Proctor and Alcock, 2012). Micro-mapping is a method designed to capture grassroots engagement beyond formal structures. Interviews with local actors further enrich our understanding of how these initiatives operate and what they do.

Integration is understood from a multidimensional perspective and as context-specific process whereby individuals become part of society. Integration depends on access to different integration domains and indicators such as employment, housing, education, health, care, and leisure. Integration is conceptualized as a context specific process and a shared responsibility, shared by the state, public authorities, the private sector, civil society, and individual citizens (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019). The term is applied here for individuals with and without a migration history (Elgenius et al., 2024).

Superdiverse neighbourhoods, in turn, refer to areas with residents from many different countries where populations may be differentiated by nationality, faith, immigration status, rights and entitlements. It has been noted that more knowledge is needed about civil society's role and how organisations serve populations in superdiverse neighbourhoods (Vertovec, 2007; Meissner and Vertovec, 2015). Superdiversity is a term that probes further into the complexities identified by intersectional approaches focus on class, ethnicity and gender by also considering migration status and whether individuals have citizenship, permanent leave to remain or refugee status. Migration status is key to understand the nature of integration processes and civil society's work (Elgenius, 2023b).

Superdiverse neighbourhoods in our sample also face socio-economic challenges such as a higher than city average levels of unemployment and lower than average income levels (Elgenius and Phillimore, 2025; Elgenius, Phillimore, Borkowska and Kawalerowicz, 2023).

Previous research

Civil society has increasingly been recognised for its integration-work mitigating inequalities and filling gaps in welfare provision (Elgenius and Phillimore, 2025) and is hereby supporting integration processes (Vertovec, 2007, 2019; Elgenius et al., 2022; Elgenius, 2023a). However, diverse and disadvantaged neighbourhoods have been portrayed as "civil society deserts" (McDonnell, Mohan & Norman, 2020; Borkowska et al., 2023) where few residents get involved for the benefit of many (MUCF, 2017). However, this portrayal of civil society offers an incomplete picture.

Much of existing scholarship has focused on formal, registered associations, thereby overlooking an important part of civil society such as informal and hybrid forms that operate outside traditional organisational structures but also performs non-profit work (McCabe and Phillimore, 2017; McCabe, Phillimore and Mayblin, 2010; Elgenius and Kawalerowicz, forthcoming). Informal initiatives, as mentioned above are often locally embedded and organised by and for residents (Phillimore, Humphris and Khan 2018). For example, colleagues identified 58 informal initiatives using micro-mapping techniques in one diverse neighbourhood in England (Soteri-Proctor and Alcock, 2012). Importantly, under favourable conditions and enabling opportunity structures, these initiatives can evolve into formal organisations with their own resources (Elgenius, Olsson and Yosuf, 2023; Phillimore, 2021). One of many examples include an informal network and grassroot initiative that started to provide homework support to 15 children in 2017 and grew to support approximately 750 children and 8,000 homework visits annually in the years that followed. This organisation developed with local parents non-profit engagement, collaborations between local actors, shared knowledge about associational life, and external funding from the municipality and charitable trusts. This initiative was invisible in the administrative registers on civil society organisations for several years before being registered as a formal association (Elgenius, Olsson and Yosuf, 2023).

Thus, the notion of an absent civil society does not reflect the non-profit action in neighbourhoods facing socioeconomic challenges (Elgenius and Phillimore, 2025). Instead, civil society has long filled critical gaps where public and private efforts fall short (Kings, 2011). Collaboration between local neighbourhood actors, and the sharing of resources are central to civil society's work and need more attention in both research and policy (Elgenius, 2023b). Moreover, access to funding remains uneven, with larger, more established organisations often favoured over smaller, community-based initiatives. Discriminatory practices in funding allocation have also been documented by colleagues (Piper, 2018) and hereby reinforcing structural inequalities.
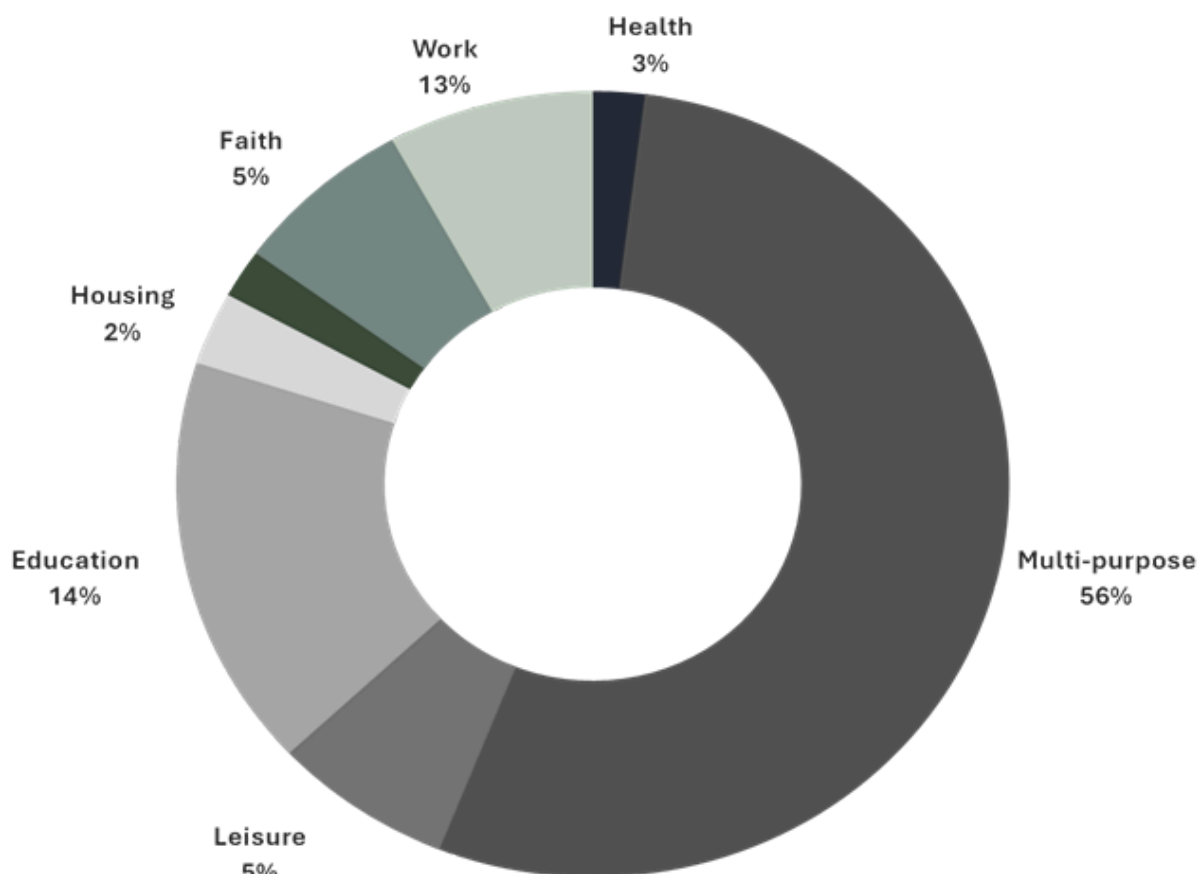
In our material, civil society representatives frequently reflect on the importance of local activities by and for residents and the challenges of navigating insider–outsider dynamics (Phillimore, Humphris and Khan, 2018;). While much of previous research has focused on employment as a key indicator for integration, integration policies have been criticised for being normative and simplistic (Schinkel, 2018; Larin, 2019) and there is no consensus about who should be responsible for integration and who it is meant to integrate. In addition, policies often fail to account for persistent labour market inequalities, shaped by factors such as discrimination and unequal treatment (Heath & Cheung, 2006, 2007; Jonsson, 2007; Khattab & Modood, 2015; Elgenius et al., 2024; Holmlund, Sjögren & Öckert, 2019). These inequalities are not limited to individuals who have migrated but are also transmitted to their children and across generations, despite a significant investment in higher education (Jonsson, Mood & Treuter, 2022).

Taken together, previous research underscores the need to broaden the understanding of integration and to learn more about how civil society —both formal and informal action— works to improve access to integration indications in neighbourhoods facing socioeconomic challenges.

Results

Below some findings from the ongoing research on how civil society works to promote integration by providing access to activities. Figure 1 presents a summary of all formal associations, charities, charitable trusts, social enterprises, grassroot organisations and informal actor-networks in five neighbourhoods and what they concentrate on. As seen in Figure 1 most organisations can be defined as multi-purpose organisation as 56% engage in multiple activities such as education, employment, leisure and sport, counselling, and support in interactions with public authorities, rights, and safety issues. Overall, we find that most organisations in areas facing socioeconomic challenges are multipurpose organisations and prioritises activities around education, employment and sports. This is the most common combination among multiactivity organisations.

Figure 1. Civil Society Working Methods – multipurpose and multiactivity

Civil society organisations collaborate with schools, libraries, health centres, and housing companies, discussed elsewhere, and adapt to the needs of both individuals, leaders and users, and society. Organisations develop and offer activities based on the demands they identify and thereby reach a wide range of groups.

: For instance, civil society plays an active role in promoting educational and employment opportunities through a range of activities and initiatives. These include homework support for both children and adults, language cafés for language learning and exchange, and various support to residents to access higher education and employment—such as help with CV writing and assistance in securing internships and trainee placements.
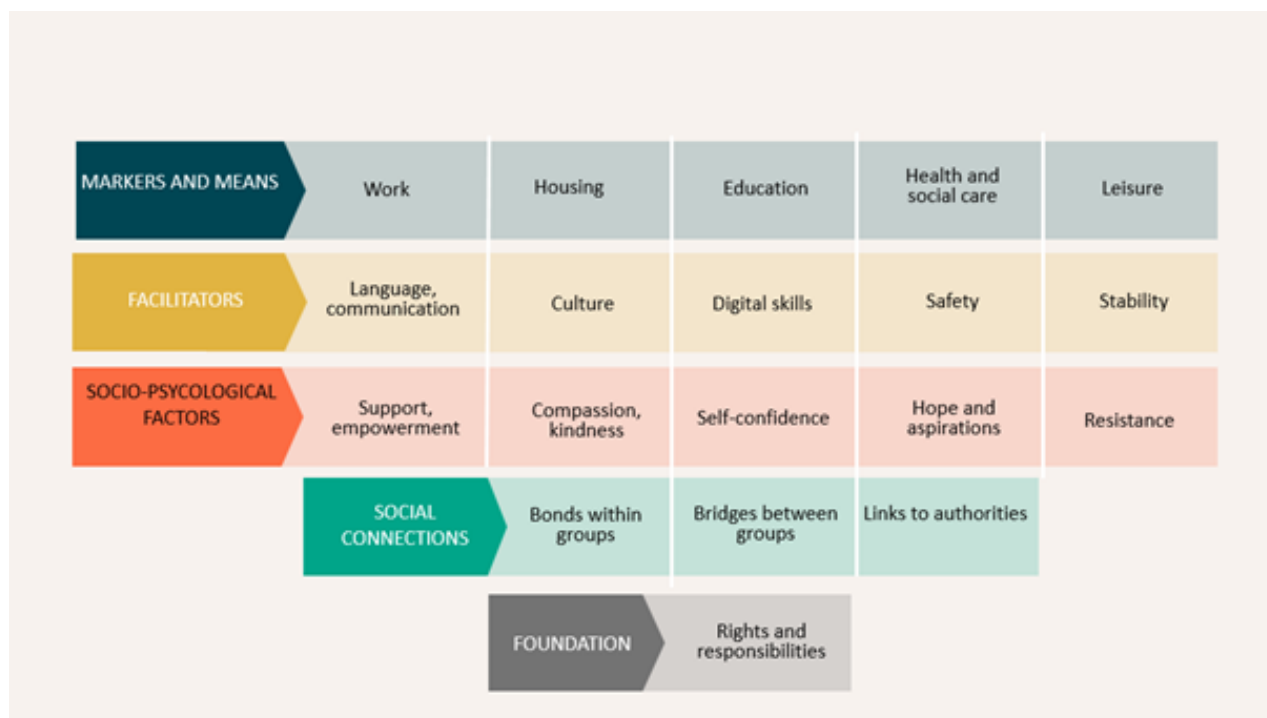
Civil society also offers leadership training, mentoring programmes, project management training, and training in entrepreneurship, often with a focus on building networks across sectors. Individuals of larger organisations and charitable trusts also provide crucial support to leaders of smaller grassroot organisations and informal initiatives. This support may include sharing financial resources and premises, offering organisational assistance, providing training in democratic and organisational forms and networking.

Through these activities, civil society helps to reduce social distance offering residents opportunities to utilise their existing skills and develop new competencies (Pemberton, Elgenius, Falge, et al., 2023; Everyday Integration, 2022).

Thus, civil society offers a personalised approach, which is central from an integration perspective and reflects important principles such as a holistic and multidimensional perspective with a focus on a needs-based process tailored to effectively meet the situations of its users.

Figure 2 shows a model or framework for integration, originally inspired by Ager and Strang (2008) and Ndofor-Tah et al. (2019), and illustrates integration as a multifaceted and multi-dimensional process to show that a holistic perspective on integration is required. The framework helps understand civil society's contributions and identifies five central integration domains (on the right) and nineteen indicators of integration. Within the first three domains, our ongoing analysis shows that civil society plays a crucial role—often by filling gaps previously addressed by the welfare state. The final domain, foundation, emphasise that rights and responsibilities constitute a foundation for integration.

Figure 2. Rethinking Integration, a Framework for Civil Society's Integration-Work

MARKERS AND MEANS	Work	Housing	Education	Health and social care	Leisure
FACILITATORS	Language, communication	Culture	Digital skills	Safety	Stability
SOCIO-PSYCOLOGICAL FACTORS	Support, empowerment	Compassion, kindness	Self-confidence	Hope and aspirations	Resistance
SOCIAL CONNECTIONS	Bonds within groups	Bridges between groups	Links to authorities		
FOUNDATION	Rights and responsibilities				

Source: The figure above has been developed to reflect our findings and introduces a new domain for socio-psychological indicators. This model was first published in a Delmi policy brief in Swedish (Elgenius, 2023a).

The striking feature of civil society's working methods is the importance of socio-psychological factors, found in 95,6% of the material. Civil society actors discuss their ways of working and refer to these as support, compassion, expectations, hope, and resistance. For example, civil society actors mention the importance of the general support they provide, meeting users with compassion and kindness, and supporting expectations and aspirations for the future (Elgenius and Phillimore, 2025). A shared motivation is to push back against the conceptualisation of "vulnerable areas" (utsatta områden) in Sweden (Elgenius and Aziz, 2024). The term 'vulnerable area' was introduced by the Swedish Police in 2015 and 59 areas were identified as having varying levels of crime-related vulnerabilities in 2024 (The Swedish Police, 2023; 2024). These neighbourhoods are here also described as resource poor. This terminology has come to frame activities beyond the police's direct remit and is resisted locally (Elgenius and Phillimore, 2025). For instance, local civil society actors mention, in overwhelming numbers, that they avoid this terminology perceived as enforcing a one-sided public discourse and that they wish to promote a changing narrative and positive expectations.

Altogether, we find that socio-psychological factors are present in over 95% of the material as noted above despite often overlooked in the integration literature. Again, the building block of the integration model above "foundations" highlights the significance of the nature and extent of individual rights and the legal conditions for accessing indicators that promote integration and hereby also emphasises the shared responsibility for integration.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The ongoing research documents a hardworking civil society engaging in significant integration work by contributing to inclusion and participation, even if actors and organisations seldom frame their activities in this way. Civil society's contribution to integration is primarily done by offering a range of activities, skills development, and networks. However, civil society also faces significant challenges, particularly in ensuring access to necessary resources (Elgenius and Phillimore, 2025).

To fully understand civil society's contribution to integration, it is important to recognise that non-profit action take place in many different forms. Informal initiatives play a central role in local communities and should not be overlooked. We explore their prevalence in forthcoming publication as they form a central role for the work described above. Successful examples highlight the importance of building supportive and enabling opportunity structures and developing context-sensitive solutions that move beyond one-dimensional

views of integration—seeing it instead as a multidimensional process (Phillimore, 2021).

Civil society's working methods has adapted to local contexts and is based on inclusive organisational forms and with a strong local neighbourhood perspective. By focusing on multidimensional activities and a holistic approach, civil society can address specific needs and contribute to participation and inclusion.

To enhance the capacity and impact of civil society, the following integrated measures are recommended:

- **Simplify Access to Funding and Support:** Simplify and centralize funding processes by assigning a lead agency to provide support for civil society organisations to reduce administrative burdens, especially for smaller organisations. Ensure adequate and sustained financial and organisational support.
- **Enhance Opportunities for Evaluation:** Resources for impact assessment and reporting would be beneficial for both civil society actors and society at large. This would also increase the visibility of civil society initiatives and their contributions.
- **Promote the Local Anchoring of Grassroot organisations and Informal Initiatives:** Supporting locally embedded civil society initiatives will contribute towards reaching underrepresenterad groups, addressing unmet needs, fostering community engagement and supporting informal initatives to evolve into sustainable organisations.
- **Foster Inclusive Partnerships:** Encourage collaboration across civil society, public institutions, universities and the private sector to share resources and co-develop context-sensitive solutions, such as citizen science projects (Pemberton, et al. 2023). In so doing process-oriented partnerships and collaborations would contribute towards sharing different types of resources.
- **Support Holistic Programmes:** Investing in multidimensional civil society initiatives contribute towards addressing diverse needs and hereby also reaching underrepresented groups.
- **Recognise Civil Society's Contributions:** Acknowledge effective practices, best practices and the efforts of both organisations and individuals to inspire continued engagement and innovation.

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