Roles of Civil Society in the Organizational Field of Homelessness in Sweden

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Abstract_ *This article examines the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in addressing homelessness in Sweden. Drawing on neo-institutional theory and qualitative interviews conducted in the country's two largest cities—Stockholm and Gothenburg—the study analyses how CSOs operate as service providers, advocates, and intermediaries within a shifting welfare landscape. While traditional Christian-based actors remain influential, the field has expanded as new organizations respond to rising social exclusion and changes in governance. The findings reveal a dual dynamic: increasing collaboration and legitimacy on the one hand, and growing bureaucratization and professionalization on the other. This tension challenges CSOs' ability to remain responsive to emerging social needs. The study also highlights CSOs' expanding role as tertiary welfare providers, filling gaps left by the public sector, particularly for asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, and individuals excluded from mainstream services. Moreover, CSOs increasingly offer legal assistance and digital mediation in response to barriers such as digital exclusion and the growing complexity of the welfare system. The article contributes to a deeper understanding of the changing structure of homelessness from the perspective of civil society welfare actors.*

Keywords_ *Homelessness, poverty, civil society organizations, roles of CSOs, tertiary welfare, digital exclusion.*

ISSN 2030-2762 / ISSN 2030-3106 online

Introduction

During recent years, and especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, Swedish civil society organizations (CSOs) have faced a growing demand for their services, particularly from families in need. This development is linked to a social security system that has become increasingly porous, leaving more individuals falling through the welfare safety net. At the same time, rising living costs have created situations in which people are unable to sustain themselves on public social support. In recent years, the City Missions[1] report encountering a growing number of individuals experiencing economic vulnerability and various forms of homelessness, including "hidden" homelessness within Swedish society (Sveriges Stadsmissioner, 2024a; Sveriges Stadsmissioner, 2024b).

However, the provision of support for impoverished and homeless individuals and families by civil society organizations is by no means a recent phenomenon in Sweden. CSOs have a long history of delivering services and advocating for the rights of citizens living in poverty and homelessness. Before the establishment of the Swedish welfare state, charities and local parishes shared responsibility for caring for vulnerable individuals and families. With the formation and expansion of the welfare state, responsibility for social welfare—including support for those experiencing poverty and homelessness—was gradually transferred to the state and, subsequently, to municipalities. This shift resulted in a more marginal role for CSOs in social policy. Nevertheless, in certain areas of social welfare, CSOs have maintained a significant presence, particularly in initiatives targeting the most vulnerable and marginalized citizens. This role has taken shape through various efforts, such as operating shelters and providing other forms of support for homeless individuals (Lundström, 2004; Olsson, 2007; Knutagård and Nordfeldt, 2007; Johansson et al., 2019; Nordfeldt, 2022). Recent developments, however, suggest that the role of CSOs within Swedish social welfare is once again expanding and taking on new forms.

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1 The City Missions are central actors in Sweden's efforts to address homelessness. The Stockholm City Mission dates back to 1854, i.e., long before the Swedish welfare state was established. Today, the City Missions constitute a network of independent civil society organizations operating in urban areas across the country. Their overarching aim is to reduce poverty, social exclusion, and homelessness by providing support to individuals in vulnerable life situations. The City Missions collaborates with public authorities and other relevant actors in different type of partnerships. These collaborations typically involve coordinated service provision, information exchange, and joint initiatives.

The aim of this article is therefore to analyse the evolving role(s) of civil society organizations engaged in addressing homelessness and to explore how and why these roles have changed in recent decades. The following research questions guide the study:

- What roles do CSOs emphasize in relation to homelessness in the 2020s?
- Are CSOs' roles in the field of homelessness characterized by continuity or change?

Homelessness in Sweden in the 2020s

Homelessness in Sweden has both increased in scope and changed in structure over recent decades. Surveys conducted by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW) indicate a rise in homelessness since the first national survey in the early 1990s, followed by a slight decrease between the 2017 and 2023 surveys[2]. In 2023, NBHW identified 27 000 individuals as living in homelessness in Sweden (Socialstyrelsen, 2024). In the national survey, 2 685 individuals were reported as homeless in Stockholm, corresponding to 27.3 persons per 10 000 inhabitants. In Gothenburg, 2 593 individuals were reported as homeless, equivalent to 43.4 persons per 10 000 inhabitants. Local surveys conducted in Stockholm and Gothenburg show slightly different figures. In Stockholm, a total of 2 196 individuals reported living in a situation of homelessness in 2024, representing a decrease of 332 persons compared with the 2022 survey (Stockholms stad 2024). In Gothenburg, homelessness is measured at the household level. In 2026, 2 310 households were reported as experiencing homelessness, comprising 2 483 adults and 495 children. The minor discrepancies between national and local surveys can primarily be attributed to differences in the timing of data collection and methodological variations, particularly regarding which actors are included as data providers.

In recent reporting on homelessness, new groups have become more visible, including young adults, older people, and so-called EU migrants. The number of women experiencing homelessness has also increased. At the same time, more "traditional" groups remain prominent—namely, individuals with substance use disorders and/or mental illness (Knutagård et al., 2020; Socialstyrelsen, 2024). Among those reported are individuals with complex social problems, as well as people seeking support from social authorities due to structural barriers in

[2] Changes in the definition of homelessness—and thus in the groups included in national surveys—have occurred over time, making comparisons across years somewhat uncertain. What is clear, however, is that the extent of homelessness in Sweden has increased since the first survey in the early 1990s, despite a slight decrease between 2017 and 2023 (as noted above).

accessing affordable housing. The term "structurally homeless" is relatively recent and refers to individuals whose lack of housing is understood to stem from poverty or a shortage of affordable housing (Sahlin, 2020).

The Swedish City Missions' 2025 annual report highlights structural homelessness by focusing on families with children (Sveriges Stadsmissioner, 2025). These families fall outside NBHW's surveys, as many do not seek help from social services but instead rely on various forms of insecure housing—conditions that can be particularly harmful for children. Also excluded from NBHW's surveys are undocumented migrants and other individuals without access to public support (see Karlsson and Vamstad, 2020), indicating the presence of a hidden homelessness not captured by government statistics, ex. the surveys made by NBHW.

Analytical Framework

The analysis of CSO roles in relation to homelessness in this article is informed by neo-institutional organizational theory. Homelessness is conceptualized as an organizational field, following DiMaggio and Powell's (1991) definition of "a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products" (p. 64). Scott (2001) similarly defines an organizational field as a community of organizations and other relevant actors that constitute a recognized area of institutional life. Within such a field, interaction among actors often leads to increasing similarity over time—a process of organizational homogenization (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). In this understanding, an organizational field comprises actors from different sectors of society: public administration, private enterprises, and civil society organizations.

In this article, however, the focus is specifically on the role(s) of CSOs within the field of homelessness; other actors are not included in the analysis.

Within the homelessness field, homogenization is shaped by legislation, guidelines, and established models. Nevertheless, a division of labour exists (cf. Massey, 1995), shaped by historical developments. With the emergence of the welfare state, responsibility for supporting citizens in need was transferred to local public authorities through the Social Services Act (SoL 2001: 453). Despite this shift, CSOs have continued to provide care for the most vulnerable and marginalized homeless individuals—those who, for various reasons, do not engage with municipal social services. Olsson and Nordfeldt (2008) describe CSOs as an additional social safety net—a third, or tertiary, welfare system. Olsson and Nordfeldt (2008) conceptualize the *tertiary welfare system* as the set of supports provided by non-profit organizations to individuals whose needs are not adequately met by, or fall outside of, the

primary – general social insurance system or the – secondary -, i.e., means-tested welfare support system, administered by the municipal social services. According to Olsson and Nordfeldt (2008) the tertiary system consists of emergency housing shelters, low-threshold services, and outreach activities that function as gap-filling interventions rather than systematic substitutes for public welfare provision.

One way to examine the division of labour within the homelessness field is to consider the roles played by different actors, and specifically the roles CSOs assume in relation to the public sector, the private sector, and households (Wijkström, 2011; Enjolras and Sivesind, 2018). At a macro level, CSO roles have been categorized as either providing services for members and non-members or serving as a voice—functioning as "schools of democracy" or advocating for and representing various societal groups (Lundström and Wijkström, 1997; Wijkström, 2011; Enjolras and Sivesind, 2018; Arvidson et al., 2018a; Johansson et al., 2019). In Sweden, this voice role has historically been closely intertwined with state development, particularly given the country's strong tradition of popular movement organizations and their ties to the Social Democratic state (Arvidson et al., 2018b; Emilsson et al., 2025).

However, CSOs engaged in homelessness—often rooted in charitable traditions (Olsson, 2007)—have typically prioritized service provision over policy advocacy, even though the voice function has been, and continues to be, relevant (Johansson et al., 2019). A third role, conceptualized as community, encompasses core aspects of Swedish civil society, including sports, culture, religion, and leisure activities (Wijkström, 2011). This role provides opportunities for social interaction and fosters a sense of belonging.

To further specify the roles of CSOs within the organizational field of homelessness, this article draws on Blennberger's (1993) classifications, later expanded by Nordfeldt (1999, 2000). These more detailed role categories encompass both service provision and advocacy functions. Blennberger's (1993) typology, developed with socially oriented CSOs as the point of departure, identified four specific roles, which may also be interconnected.

1. **The avant-garde role** refers to the function of CSOs as innovators and pioneers, identifying emerging social problems that have not yet been recognized by public authorities. This role includes developing new practices and forms of support, as well as maintaining the flexibility and capacity to respond quickly to emerging needs. In Blennberger's conceptualization, these pioneering activities carry the expectation that public authorities will eventually assume responsibility for the issues initially addressed by CSOs.

2. **The complement role** refers to activities that add qualitative value to existing public welfare services without replacing them. Within this role, CSOs address unmet or insufficiently covered needs by offering additional support—i.e., filling gaps—or providing specialized interventions. CSOs work alongside public welfare institutions while maintaining a distinct organizational logic.

3. **The alternative role** describes situations in which CSOs operate within the same domain as public actors but provide services that differ from public provisions in terms of values, methods, or ideological foundations. These services offer users meaningful choices beyond standardized welfare arrangements.

4. **The replacement role** refers to situations in which CSOs assume responsibilities that would otherwise fall to the public sector, often due to government withdrawal or resource limitations. This may occur temporarily, for example, during crises, or more permanently as a consequence of welfare retrenchment (see Blennberger, 1993).

Nordfeldt (1999, 2000) identified a fifth role emerging from her empirical studies:

5. **The mediating-link role** describes the intermediary function that CSOs play between individuals and public authorities. It refers to how organizations translate, negotiate, and mediate needs, experiences, and claims from service users into forms that are recognizable within public welfare systems. At the same time, the mediating link captures how policies, norms, and institutional logics of the welfare state are conveyed to individuals through civil society actors. This role can facilitate access to social services as well as provide advocacy support (see Nordfeldt, 1999, 2000).

Research Design

This article draws on empirical material from a study of civil society organizations (CSOs) operating within the homelessness sector in Sweden's two largest cities—Stockholm and Gothenburg. The study was designed as a counterpart, albeit more limited in scope, to research conducted in the mid-to-late 1990s and presented in a doctoral thesis in 1999 (Nordfeldt, 1999). The present study employs the same qualitative methodology as the earlier research, using semi-structured informant interviews (Esaiasson et al., 2002) complemented by document analysis, including policy documents and organizational activity descriptions.

The first stage of the research involved mapping organizations providing services to people experiencing homelessness in Stockholm and Gothenburg. This included revisiting organizations from the 1990s study—such as the City Missions and The Salvation Army—while also identifying actors that have emerged since the early

2000s in response to new forms of homelessness; one example is Vid Din Sida (By Your Side), which supports elderly people living in poverty and homelessness in Stockholm. Including both long-established and more recently formed organizations enabled a comprehensive analysis of developments within the organizational field of homelessness.

The second stage consisted of individual interviews with representatives from the CSOs identified in the mapping phase. Potential interviewees were contacted by e-mail or telephone and provided with information about the study. Those approached were individuals with broad knowledge of the organization and its development over time, such as board members, executive managers, or equivalent decision-makers. A total of 18 interviews were conducted between November 2020 and March 2021. While the original intention was to conduct on-site visits and in-person interviews, the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated the use of digital platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Although effective, this approach limited opportunities for direct observation of organizational practices.

The study was conducted in accordance with the Swedish Research Council's CODEX guidelines for research involving human subjects (www.codex.vr.se). Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees, and the study complies with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). No sensitive personal data were collected; the focus remained on organizational activities and inter-organizational relationships. All informants were anonymized, and the interview data are securely stored on an approved research server at Karlstad University, where they will be retained for 10 years following the project's completion.

The interview material was analysed using qualitative content analysis, allowing for a systematic and interpretive examination of the data. This approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of the phenomena under investigation by attending to contextual and conceptual nuances. To address the second research question concerning continuity and change in CSO roles, the analysis is explicitly linked to findings from the earlier study conducted in the 1990s (Nordfeldt, 1999).

The Research Context: CSOs in the Field of Homelessness in Stockholm and Gothenburg

As noted in the introduction, CSOs working in the homelessness sector include both long-established organizations and more recently initiated initiatives. The duality of continuity and change within this organizational landscape is discussed below under the headings *Inertia* and *Change*.

Inertia: Long traditions of social support

As in many Western countries, Swedish civil society is heterogeneous and continuously evolving yet marked by a notable degree of stability. CSOs active in the homelessness sector range from large, professionalized organizations to small associations and volunteer-based networks. Over time, the organizational landscape has expanded to include new activities as well as new actors.

CSOs provide a wide array of services—from meeting basic needs such as food, sleep, clothing, hygiene, and social contact through open day centres to offering specialized housing solutions, either independently or in collaboration with municipal social services, including within Housing First models. For larger and more professionalized organizations—such as the City Missions, the Salvation Army, Convictus in Stockholm, and the Rescue Mission in Gothenburg—homelessness constitutes one of several areas of engagement. Other areas include poverty, substance use, social exclusion, unemployment and labour market integration, migration and integration, physical and mental health, domestic violence, elderly care, and support for children and youth.

Despite ongoing developments, the organizational field of homelessness also displays continuity. Traditional organizations—some with charitable roots dating back to the 19th century—remain central actors. All organizations included in the 1990s study are still operating, with several having expanded their areas of focus and increased their staffing. In the earlier study, Nordfeldt (1999) argued that CSOs occupy a particular niche in addressing homelessness, providing care and services to the most disadvantaged and acutely homeless individuals—those who often lack current contact with social services. The present study confirms that, while many CSOs—particularly the larger ones—have broadened their activities to address wider social challenges, this specific niche remains highly relevant.

In the 1990s, some CSO representatives expressed hope that homelessness would eventually be eradicated, rendering their services unnecessary (Nordfeldt, 1999). In contrast, interviewees in the present study described a growing and continuous demand for their services, driven by new target groups and increasingly complex social problems (see also Vamstad and Karlsson, 2022).

Change: A growing demand for CSO services

The increasing demand for services, noted above, was a recurring theme among the majority of interviewed CSO representatives. This finding is consistent with previous research on Swedish City Missions (Karlsson and Vamstad, 2020; Vamstad and Karlsson, 2022). Part of this heightened demand can be linked to CSOs' participation in public procurement processes, through which they operate as service

providers alongside other welfare actors. Among the larger organizations in this study, several had developed their own "chain of care" and established collaborations with social authorities and landlords within Housing First initiatives.

A central theme in the interviews was the emergence of new groups in need of support, as well as new forms of need (cf. Karlsson and Vamstad, 2020; Vamstad and Karlsson, 2022). These groups include individuals excluded from the welfare system—such as foreign citizens with limited or no access to public services—and individuals who fall between institutional responsibilities despite formal entitlements. Examples include people caught between social services and psychiatric or general healthcare, or between different sectors of public welfare provision. Several interviewees also described a new form of poverty characterized by the need for material and financial assistance (cf. Karlsson and Vamstad, 2020). The Swedish City Missions' 2024 Poverty Report similarly highlights a growing need for financial support among individuals receiving long-term public income assistance (Sveriges Stadsmissioner, 2024a). Interviewees also noted an increasingly heterogeneous client base, requiring a broader range of support services. Taken together, these developments contribute to the rising demand for CSO interventions and often reflect broader critiques of the public welfare system as insufficiently responsive and difficult to access.

Procurement and professionalization

In recent decades, Sweden's welfare system has become increasingly pluralistic and market-oriented in its provision of social services. While the expansion of non-public providers has been driven primarily by private enterprises, CSOs have also strengthened their presence within local welfare markets. Municipal reimbursements to CSOs for health and social care services have increased substantially—by 80% between 2000 and 2010, and by an additional 46% between 2010 and 2019 (Johansson et al., 2023). Participation in public procurement requires CSOs to adopt more professionalized organizational structures and management vocabularies, reflected in interviewees' references to concepts such as "efficiency" and "professionalism" (cf. Wijkström and Zimmer, 2011). For some larger organizations, professionalization is not new, but its prominence has grown over recent decades.

Interviewees identified several positive aspects of professionalization, including greater organizational clarity, clearer divisions of responsibility, and the use of evidence-based methods. For others, however, professionalization has altered recruitment practices. As one interviewee noted: "The requirements have been greatly raised over the past 15 years in terms of education level and formal competence" (Int. 4). In some organizations, volunteers have been replaced by paid professionals, and fewer staff now have lived experience of homelessness or

substance use. Interviewees also reflected on how these developments intersect with organizational mission and values. As one representative stated: "We must go back to: What is the purpose of our organization?" (Int. 7).

Another interviewee elaborated:

> There is always a risk in this type of organization that its history is somewhat forgotten and… something gets lost in professionalization and marketification. You know… it's easy to go with the flow and forget where we come from and why we really exist. We are not… well, we are not the municipality, and we are not a company. We are NN. (Int. 4)

Several interviewees emphasized the importance of maintaining a degree of organizational autonomy—specifically, the ability to provide accommodation and services outside public procurement frameworks, based on internal CSO decisions. One example concerns CSOs reserving rooms or beds for individuals without social service approval. Such accommodations were financed through private donations, grants, or revenues from second-hand stores.

Findings: CSO Roles in the Field of Homelessness

This section revisits the analytical framework outlined above regarding CSO roles in the field of homelessness—namely the avant-garde, complement, alternative, substitute, and mediating link (see Blennberger, 1993; Nordfeldt, 1999; 2000)—to present the findings of the present study.

Avant-garde: Initiating and innovating services

A longstanding and still highly relevant role of CSOs in the 2020s is that of the avant-garde: identifying emerging groups in precarious situations and responding to new social problems (cf. Vamstad and Karlsson, 2022). Organizations established after 2000 have often focused on specific target groups, including elderly homeless individuals, EU migrants, and refugees, such as asylum seekers and undocumented persons. One recent example is the above-mentioned Vid Din Sida ("By Your Side"), which began as a grassroots initiative distributing coffee from the back of a car and later developed into Sweden's first leisure centre for elderly individuals in vulnerable circumstances.

Traditional CSOs in the homelessness sector have also introduced new forms of support. Notable examples include social grocery stores offering low-cost food sourced exclusively from surplus donations from the grocery industry. (see also Vamstad et al., 2024). Stockholm City Mission operates *Matmissionen*

("The Food Mission"), while Gothenburg City Mission runs *Matcentralen* ("The Food Center"). These initiatives provide both economic relief and opportunities for employment training.

However, interviewees also pointed to constraints on the avant-garde role stemming from CSOs' involvement in public procurement and their role as contracted service providers. This dependence on municipal assignments was described as limiting organizational flexibility and underscoring the need for alternative funding streams. As one interviewee explained:

> We still have a chance to be fleet-footed in donor-funded activities. But even here, we are affected by collective agreements—there are so many work environment regulations to comply with. As a result, no one is really fleet-footed today. A few non-profit organizations are… well, those built strictly on unpaid volunteers can be fleet-footed. (Int. 7)

This suggests that smaller, less professionalized organizations may find it easier to act as avant-garde actors, although securing financial sustainability remains a persistent challenge.

Is the complementary role becoming a replacement?

Over recent decades, the role of CSOs as a complement to public sector social services has been emphasized by policymakers, civil servants, and CSO representatives alike (see e.g., Dahlberg, 2006; SOU 2019: 56). Several interviewees highlighted this complementary function, including one who stated:

> I think this is what we see as our primary mission—to try to be where the public sector may not be sufficient or where we identify unmet needs. We aim to be present in that way. (Int. 13)

A key premise of this complementary role is that CSOs do not exercise formal authority, which enables them to reach homeless individuals who, for various reasons, avoid contact with social authorities. Once trust is established, CSOs can act as intermediaries, facilitating connections between individuals and public welfare services. One interviewee described this mediating function as follows:

> We can feed people to death with sandwiches here, you know, but if they are not moved onwards… /… / that's what we aim for—to pass them on or monitor them to ensure they receive a solid action plan regarding healthcare as well as social services. (Int. 3)

Another aspect of the complementary role highlighted by interviewees concerned financial assistance for individuals who are ineligible for public economic support. Rather than distributing cash, CSOs help cover specific expenses such as rent,

electricity bills, dental care, medication, transportation, or basic furnishings for a new home. In addition, both large traditional CSOs and small volunteer-based organizations provide food assistance, including the distribution of food bags—a practice that has reportedly increased in recent years, partly in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, the notion of CSOs as merely complementary actors is increasingly contested. Their scope has expanded to include new target groups and a broader range of services. Drawing on studies of Swedish City Missions, Vamstad (2018) and Vamstad and Karlsson (2022) argue that these organizations now provide essential services to a substantial number of individuals who lack access to public support, effectively positioning them as primary caregivers rather than supplementary providers. In Blennberger's (1993) framework, this development shifts CSOs toward functioning as replacements for public social services rather than complements. Moreover, by delivering services in collaboration with, or on behalf of, municipal administrations, CSOs have become welfare producers alongside public institutions—further challenging the idea of a purely complementary role (see Vamstad, 2018).

Still an alternative?

Blennberger (1993) defines the alternative role as one in which CSOs operate within the same field as public actors but offer different approaches, values, or methods, thereby providing users with meaningful choices. In the present study, this alternative role appears increasingly blurred. The primary reason seems to be the rules and regulations associated with public procurement, in which CSOs are increasingly embedded. For Christian-based organizations, for example, the explicitly Christian content of their activities has been toned down. One explanation offered in interviews was organizational professionalization, as discussed above: staff are now hired to a greater extent based on formal competence, a development linked to procurement requirements that prioritize professional qualifications. This shift limits the extent to which a Christian message can be emphasized. Another explanation was the ambition to ensure that all visitors feel welcome, regardless of religious affiliation or non-affiliation.

Nevertheless, Christian-based organizations continue to offer pastoral counselling, and some housing facilities still include practices such as morning devotions. Staff is not required to hold a Christian faith, but they are expected to share the organization's core values. In some cases, human rights principles were emphasized more strongly than explicitly Christian foundations (see also Vamstad and Karlsson, 2022). Interviewees provided several explanations for this development.

Some interviewees stressed the importance of CSOs maintaining an alternative position vis-à-vis both the public and private sectors. One interviewee articulated this view as follows:

> I have great faith in what is neither market nor state, and I believe it is important for us in civil society to dare… to regain some confidence in the fact that what we offer often becomes the glue that holds a well-functioning society together. And this is something we have somewhat forgotten in Sweden, where we have placed strong trust in market solutions and in a powerful public bureaucracy. That has of course benefited us, but we also need to safeguard what belongs to neither one nor the other. (Int. 4)

Alternative funding—such as raised funds, donations, and self-generated revenue—creates opportunities for CSOs to offer genuine alternatives. However, this is closely connected to the dynamics described above regarding their roles as both complements and substitutes.

The role as a mediating link

The role of CSOs as a mediating link between individuals experiencing homelessness and local social authorities was identified as significant in the 1990s and subsequently incorporated into Blennberger's analytical framework (Nordfeldt, 1999). The present study indicates that this role has expanded, becoming more structured and complex within certain CSOs. One interviewee described this function as follows:

> We function as grout—we don't directly provide social services, we enable their provision by ensuring that they reach… that the provisions offered by public agencies reach the appropriate target groups. (Int. 1)

Over recent decades, cooperation between CSOs and municipal social authorities has increased, contributing to enhanced legitimacy and recognition for civil society actors. Many municipalities now engage in institutionalized collaboration with CSOs through user advisory boards or involvement groups advocating for various target populations. Such collaboration may also take more informal forms (Johansson et al., 2019).

In the present study, interviewees described cooperation as primarily centred on individual cases, with an expressed ambition to "hook arms" with municipal social authorities. The role of CSOs in facilitating access to the local social security system was frequently emphasized. At the same time, interviewees stressed that CSOs represent something distinct from social authorities—a perception linked to the unique characteristics of civil society organizations (cf. Hultén and Wijkström,

2006; Gavelin et al., 2010). As noted earlier, CSOs do not exercise formal authority, which enables them to build trust and reach individuals in vulnerable situations who, for various reasons, avoid engagement with public services.

Linking into the social welfare system

A recurring theme in the interviews was the increasing difficulty individuals face in accessing the public welfare system:

> If you have dropped out of the welfare system—or never been part of it—it is quite difficult to get back in. (Int. 13)

For individuals entitled to social welfare but disconnected from public services—often due to previous negative experiences with authorities—CSOs' mediating function frequently involves motivation and trust-building. This can be a long-term process aimed at rebuilding confidence in welfare institutions. One interviewee emphasized the importance of avoiding actions that might reinforce distrust in public authorities:

> We have an agency role and assist in resolving these issues. /… / We must avoid falling into the trap of exacerbating distrust in public efforts [by social services]. Instead, together we look at what is reasonable to agree to and what to expect. /… / We enable case management. (Int. 1)

However, the mediating function may also involve direct service provision. Some large and professionalized CSOs have developed "chains of care" as alternatives to public social services, although these often require municipal approval through framework agreements.

Linking through representation and interpretation

Interviewees emphasized the role of CSOs in representation, which takes multiple forms—such as supporting individuals in interactions with social authorities, healthcare services, and landlords. Representation may involve acting on behalf of individuals or assisting them in self-advocacy (cf. Johansson et al., 2019).

Several interviewees reported that individuals often received better treatment when accompanied by CSO staff or volunteers during interactions with social services, healthcare providers, or landlords. Representation in formalized contexts was also highlighted, including participation in a so called Coordinated Individual Plan (Samordnad Individuell Plan, SIP) meetings, which bring together representatives from relevant authorities, family members, and CSO staff.

In addition, some interviewees described CSOs as interpreters facilitating communication between individuals and professionals. This role resembles representation but focuses on clarifying bureaucratic language or bridging linguistic barriers:

> The most important or most common thing that we've noticed is that we are needed as a kind of interpreter, that is, interpret between participants and the social services, in both directions. (Int. 13)

Interpretation may be necessary for individuals with limited knowledge of the Swedish language, but also for people who struggle to understand administrative processes due to prolonged marginalization.

Linking through legal support

Since the 1990s, the provision of legal support has emerged as a distinct CSO role within homelessness services. One interviewee illustrated this development as follows:

> We almost need to be amateur lawyers. Well, not exactly—but we must understand rights and obligations. This has always been necessary, but now there are so many different cases. (Int. 10)

The growing need for legal assistance is primarily linked to CSOs' engagement with refugees and immigrants. This support often involves interpreting decisions from migration authorities, assisting with paperwork, and providing guidance on bureaucratic processes.

Some CSOs collaborate with street lawyers who offer specialized legal advice. Additionally, in Stockholm, law students established a CSO in 2005 dedicated to providing free legal services for homeless and socially vulnerable individuals. This organization offers assistance to visitors at the CSOs included in this study.

Linking in the digital era

The increasing digitalization of public services has introduced new support and mediating responsibilities for CSOs in this study. In the digital society of the 2020s, engaging with social services, social insurance agencies, employment agencies, healthcare providers, housing companies and their queues, banks, and other essential institutions requires access to a smartphone, computer, and electronic identification. For many individuals at risk of digital exclusion (cf. Internetstiftelsen [Internet Foundation], 2020), this digital dependency has created significant barriers to accessing services.

Contacting social authorities, applying for housing, and navigating welfare systems often require a charged mobile phone or computer—an obvious challenge for individuals experiencing acute homelessness, such as those sleeping rough. In addition, technological knowledge and digital literacy are necessary to interact effectively with these systems. One interviewee vividly described these challenges:

> /… / Digitalization is great for me—I can manage more or less everything by phone. But if you don't have a BankID, a smartphone, or a computer, it's not so easy. It's much harder to walk into a social services office and say, 'Hi, can I see someone?'—because now, they'll just tell you to call a number during office hours /… / And if you're homeless, you can't charge your phone—assuming you even still have it after waking up on a bus. Some of the older folks have missed the internet revolution altogether. This is also tough—it's human nature; when you don't understand something or feel incapable, you avoid it. If someone tells you to log into a webpage and leave a message, but you don't even know how to access the internet, it's easy to just back away. (Int. 13)

In response to these challenges, CSOs in the 2020s increasingly facilitate digital access by providing, for example:

- Computers and internet access for individuals needing to apply for services
- Guidance on using digital platforms required for communication with social authorities
- Support in acquiring electronic identification (BankID) to enable access to public services

By bridging the digital divide, CSOs help ensure that marginalized individuals can navigate and utilize essential welfare services despite the growing dependence on digital tools.

Conclusion

> There has been an enormous change regarding this part of welfare—social welfare targeting the most vulnerable groups in our society. Whether it concerns the economy, housing, substance abuse, or violence, or whatever… I can see that we are receiving an increasingly large slice of the cake on our plates. (Int. 6)

This interviewee continued by describing a growing demand for basic necessities such as food, with an increasing number of people turning to CSOs for a warm meal or a bag of groceries. This description reflects a shared view among many CSO representatives interviewed in this study. Collectively, they reported a rising demand for CSO support and services in the field of homelessness, accompanied by increasing heterogeneity in both target groups and individual circumstances. This trend has continued beyond the period of data collection. For example, during Christmas 2025, media outlets reported a growing number of people—particularly

families with children—seeking food assistance, Christmas gifts, and social community from local CSOs during the holidays (see e.g., Aftonbladet 2025-12-10; DN 2025-12-21; SvD 2025-12-24).

Taking a step back and reflecting on developments since the late 1990s, the organizational field of homelessness displays both continuity and change. Large traditional organizations continue to dominate the landscape. Historically rooted in Christian charity, many of these organizations have evolved, with some shifting their emphasis toward human rights principles (see Vamstad and Karlsson, 2022).

Since the early 2000s, however, the field of homelessness has expanded and transformed. The institutional shift from a welfare state to a welfare mix in Sweden has resulted in CSOs increasingly becoming providers of social support within a welfare market. This development has produced two contrasting effects. On the one hand, CSOs have gained increased legitimacy and stronger ties with municipal social services. On the other hand, professionalization and bureaucratization—particularly within local procurement systems—have challenged their ability to act as avant-garde actors. As a result, innovative and flexible initiatives increasingly depend on alternative funding sources such as donations and revenues from second-hand stores.

Societal changes have also contributed to greater heterogeneity in CSO activities. The rise of marginalized populations with limited or no access to public welfare—such as asylum seekers, vulnerable EU citizens, undocumented migrants, and third-country nationals—has broadened the scope of services provided by traditional CSOs. At the same time, new organizations and networks have emerged, often focusing on specific groups or social issues.

In this context, the complementary role of CSOs has evolved into a supplementary role. Consequently, the tertiary welfare system role (cf. Olsson and Nordfeldt, 2008) appears to have strengthened rather than diminished since the turn of the millennium.

The increasing reliance on digital technology for accessing welfare services has created new barriers for individuals in vulnerable situations. CSOs now mediate digital access by providing practical support for individuals lacking electronic identification, digital literacy, or even a place to charge a mobile phone. These findings highlight digital exclusion as a form of social marginalization that warrants further research and policy attention.

A key question arising from these findings concerns why the mediating role of CSOs has grown so significantly. While barriers to housing access have been well documented (see e.g., Knutagård et al., 2020; Grander, 2024), this study suggests that barriers to accessing public welfare have also increased.

Taken together, the findings indicate that Sweden's welfare system has become increasingly fragmented and inaccessible for marginalized groups, placing additional pressure on CSOs to bridge these gaps.

Conflict of Interest Declaration

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Ethics Approval Statement

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Karlstad University. No sensitive personal data were collected during the course of the research.

Statements and acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank researchers at the Center for Civil Society Research at Marie Cederschiöld University for their valuable comments and feedback during the early stages of this article. Grateful acknowledgement is also made for research funding provided by the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF).

The study was reported to MUCF in 2022.

The empirical material, and part of the analytical framework, has been used in an article in Swedish, with a main focus on poverty and homelessness. This article is included in the reference list (Nordfeldt 2022).

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