

Privatizing local government Solutions and attitudes in Finland

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The rising interest in privatization

The welfare state concept, as we know, is heavily centered on the public sector. It does not follow, however, that the welfare state is solely a matter for the state. Reaching out for individual citizens is primarily a local matter. Therefore it comes as no surprise that, for instance, within a Nordic context, the expansion of the welfare state has foremost meant an enlargement of the volume of local governmental services. Major regulatory responsibility may well remain within central government, but the provision of services is a local matter.

In the Finnish case the development has been rather rapid. Two decades ago public employment numbered around 335.000, the state and local government employment being of roughly the same size. Today public sector employment reaches almost 700.000, out of which almost 500.000 are employed by local government. Thus local employees outnumber state employees almost by 2,5 to 1. It comes as no surprise then that increasingly local government has come to interest those central decision-makers that worry about the overall national economy. According to a rather widespread opinion – not shared by all unions of local employees – local governmental expansion must be curbed, preferably without damaging local services. Privatization, in the sense in which we will use the term here, has come to be seen as one possible solution.

Many "softer" considerations have supported the same type of conclusion. Thus it has been argued that the expansion of the welfare state has led to large and ungovernable institutional and regulatory arrangements. Deregulation and increasing dependence on market-mechanisms are seen to be a step in the right direction. This would also mean that a larger responsibility is put on the shoulders of private citizens and on local govern-

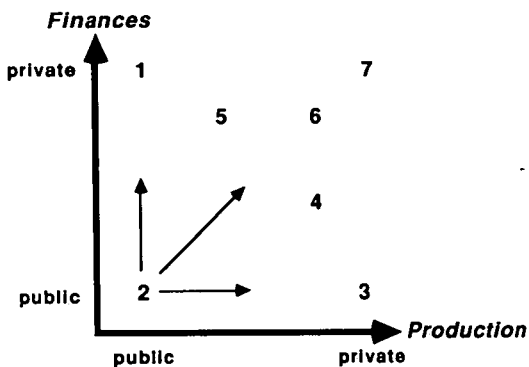
mental units. Such an effect is judged to be desirable in order to counter increasing public discontent with politics and bureaucracy. At the same time it would be possible to adapt local services to local conditions, a consideration which has been hard to meet due to the large variation of Finnish communes and the heavily centralized regulation. Out of a total of 460 communes, 194 have a population of less than 4.000.

Of course, also the international climate of opinion has supported conclusions in the same direction, especially during the 1980'ies. But against this background it is slightly surprising that privatization has not been a major question on the public agenda until quite recently. The main reason for this late interest seems to be two-folded. The buildup of the Finnish welfare state started comparatively late. All through the 1980'ies it was boosted by an exceptionally well performing economy. Even today the overall rate of taxation lies in the vicinity of the OECD average.

Today the good days seem to be over. Local governmental finances have rapidly deteriorated, among other things due to linear increase in debt all through the last decade. The search for new solutions has placed privatization on the agenda. But still privatization as a term is burdened by ideological interpretations. Thus the public debate rarely uses the word. Instead we talk about strengthening possibilities for consumer or client-choice or about an ethos of service within local government. The very word privatization has been given a narrow meaning pointing primarily to the sell-out of public property to private buyers. In the present election campaign, for instance, the secretary of commerce (cons.), has proposed that state-owned enterprises ought to be sold to private interests.

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Although we do not intend to dwell on conceptual issues here, we have to note that we will use the concept of privatization in a broader sense than our secretary of commerce. In keeping with some notions advanced by Ole P Kristensen (1984) we take it for granted that public authorities have a responsibility for services being provided according to the welfare state ideals. The main question is how this service provision should be organized. It would seem fruitful to make at least two distinctions. Financing services may vary from public to private and so may the production of services. In both respects we ought, perhaps, to conceptualize the differences as a continuum rather than as purely nominal dichotomies. The public sector may in many respects, mostly with income-redistributional ambitions, participate in financing services provided by private entrepreneurs or it may require some additional user fees for services mainly produced and financed by the public sector itself. Production arrangements may also vary in many respects, from pure dependence on private actors to market sharing and pure public production. Thus we can combine the financial and production aspects of services.



Figur 1. Financial and production aspects of services

Inside the finance and production coordinates we have suggested some typical alternatives used in the privatization debate. The tendency at central governmental level to reform agencies into public companies is the first alternative. At the local level we find a tendency in the same direction. A purely public solution is our second alternative. The third possibility points to the tendency within public administration to buy services at the private market. Our fourth alternative rep-

resents a shared responsibility with respect to both production and financing. A move toward private day care of children together with public financial reimbursement would represent this type. The fifth solution is of the same kind as the fourth and could be represented by public agencies selling services at the private market. Our sixth solution represents an almost pure private alternative although the public authorities still maintain overall responsibility; an example would be licensing broadcasting under certain publicly specified conditions. The seventh alternative, finally, stands for pure private market operations.

It may well be that the public-private distinction should be seen in relation to more or less market-like conditions rather than in relation to simple ownership. Some privatization solutions do not include change of ownership. Rather they refer to increasing competition within the public sector, especially to situations in which agencies are dependent upon other actors for their resources. Within the public health sector many solutions are looked for that would cut automatic budget funding and increase dependency on consumer decisions made by others, be that patients, primary health care doctors or some other consumer representative.

In this essay we shall consider privatization to represent a move in the direction of the arrows in the figure above. Our main interest is in a type of spontaneous privatization development, i.e. a development that is neither the object of any major public sector reform nor a development under the manifest heading of privatization. For some years it has seemed that local governments increasingly buy market-services, especially as supplementary or supporting services to those produced by local governments. Also within the voluntary activity sector citizen groups have been given support in order to produce services supplementing mainstream public services. Concurrently the public debate has turned toward more far reaching solutions. Both within child care, care of elderly and primary health care solutions have been looked for that would lessen the direct burden on the public purse and include incentives for employees. Thus we shall also map some of the opinions held by those with primary responsibility for developing alternative solutions for local government.

Within the Finnish setting no general presentation of these trends has been produced. We have

therefore linked together data from three quite different privatization studies. Taken together the studies enable us to give a general overview of recent developments as well as the opinion climate among decisionmakers. In this paper we will only in passing, and lastly, touch upon the general public opinion climate. Due to the heavy ideological bias of the privatization concept, results with regard to the general public opinion are very contradictory.

Local governmental privatization: volume and prospects

How much privatization

In the following we will describe how much privatization there is in local government. Furthermore, the question we will ask us is: "Is privatization widely spread in municipalities"? By "widely spread" we are referring to the use of private solutions in many different sectors or activities in local governmental services.

To "draw this picture" we have used two different data sets. First, we have data which are part of a study of the Finnish chief administrators in local government. A questionnaire was sent to the chief administrators in the spring 1990 (Ståhlberg 1990; Pikkala 1990; Granqvist 1990). To this questionnaire, which was sent to 445 chief administrators, there was a response of 85 %. The administrators were, among other things, asked to list examples of private solutions used in the provision of service at the local level. The private solutions were, first, purchased service from or contracted out to private enterprises and second, voluntary activities granted support by the municipality. The extent of privatization according to this data set (the ÅA study; Åbo Academy) is expressed by the number of sectors where such private solutions are found.

The second data set was collected by the Finnish Employers' General Group in 1990 (part of Finnish Employers' Confederation). In this study the chief administrators or the chairmen of the communal councils were asked about the extent of privatization. Questionnaires were sent only to those communes with more than 10 000 inhabitants ($n = 109$): the response was 88 %.

These data (the EGG study) included seven activities: building, cleaning, meal services, waste disposal (refuse collection), guard duties, laundry, and transportation. In this case "much privatization" means that many of these seven activities are arranged by purchasing services from private

enterprises (Työnantajain yleinen ryhmä 1988, 1990).

In the EGG – questionnaire the administrative chiefs or the chairmen of the communal councils or communal boards were asked in which way the seven activities were arranged – wholly or partly by the municipality, on the one side, or wholly or almost wholly by purchasing service from private enterprises, on the other side.

We have summed up the volume variables to indexes for both of the data sets. As mentioned before, volume in the ÅA study refers to the number of sectors where private solutions are found and in the EGG – set to the number of activities that are wholly or mainly contracted out to private producers.

Volume according to the ÅA set is described in an index that consists of two volume variables: one (buying service from private enterprises) varying between 0 and 5, and the other (granting voluntary activities) varying between 0 and 4. As can be seen, this ÅA volume index is varying between 0 and 9.

The following table gives the volume of privatization in Finnish local government, according to the ÅA volume index.

Table 1. Volume of privatization in Finnish communes 1990 according to size of population, % ($n = 301$)

index	–4 000	4–8 000	8–30 000	30 000–	total
–2	40.9	37.3	25.8	13.3	33.9
3	23.6	26.5	25.8	13.3	24.6
4	25.5	22.9	29.0	26.7	26.9
5–	10.0	13.3	19.4	46.7	15.6
$n =$	110	83	93	15	301

As can be seen from the table, the communes that use private solutions in very few sectors more often are small communes, whereas the "real users" very often are the big communes. It must be remembered that the index used does not directly give the number of sectors where there are private solutions: high values on the index imply that the commune is using both types of private solutions in many sectors. It may be said, then, that privatizing in such a commune is rather wide. Nevertheless, there seems to be quite a clear connection between size and volume in privatization.

In the case of the EGG data we created an index consisting of the seven activities listed before. We gave those alternatives which are "private" value one: the activity in question is wholly or al-

most wholly performed by private entrepreneurs or enterprises. The other arrangements got value zero. Summing up these seven activities we got another volume index varying between 0 and 7.

Table 2. Volume of privatization in Finnish communes 1990 according to size of population, % (n = 95)

index	-15 000	15-20 000	20-30 000	30 000	total
-2	9.1	15.4	16.7	15.0	12.6
3	36.4	23.1	22.2	35.0	31.6
4	32.6	31.8	38.5	38.9	32.6
5-	22.7	23.1	22.2	25.0	23.2
n =	44	13	18	20	95

The second volume version is not as distinct as the one before. A connection between size and volume can hardly be seen. In the EGG data there are only communes which have more than 10 000 inhabitants; these communes are therefore rather large. The effect of size has then disappeared, indicating that privatization is used evenly by larger communes. On the whole, both versions seems to support each other: their profiles are rather like, although it must be remembered that the indexes do not describe the same thing and that therefore they are in fact not comparable. But according to both measures we find that around half of all communes make widespread use of private solutions.

It might be interesting to discuss the volume of privatization in terms of both these indexes. There was an overlap for the data sets in questions for 68 municipalities. Again, it seems that the multi-users most often are the very largest communes and that smaller communes are more moderate users of private solutions in their service provision.

This, of course, is a matter of supply. The only limitation for contracting out, for example, has been said to lie in the number of available providers (Manchester 1989: 14-18). It is not difficult to think that there would be many providers in large communes.

Table 3. Development in privatization in Finnish communes according to size of population 1990, % (n = 95)

	-15 000	15-20 000	20-30 000	30 000	total
privatization has increased over the last two years (index \geq 4)	45.4	38.5	44.5	50.0	45.3
privatization will increase over the next five years (index \geq 5)	50.0	46.2	55.6	60.0	52.6
n =	44	13	18	20	95

Prospects for privatization

Have private solutions in service provision at the local level become more usual? Will the privatization development continue?

In the EGG - study the administrators/leading politicians were asked to evaluate the development in use of private solutions from 1988 to 1990 - still concerning the same activities. The administrators/politicians were asked to give some prospects too - this time for the following five years.

We created the same type of indexes as above for the views on development in privatization. Those who saw increasing use of private solutions got value one, the others zero. Summing up the different activities we got a retrospect-index, again varying between 0 and 7. The same operation was performed for the use of private enterprises and entrepreneurs in the future and so we got a prospect-index.

These retrospective and prospective views are summed up in the following table.

As can be seen, almost half of the administrators/politicians saw an increase in privatization from 1988 to 1990. More than half of them foresee that privatization will increase further. This can be summarized very shortly and clearly: privatization is advancing in Finland at the local level.

In this chapter we have described how much privatization there is in local government. In the following we will describe what the chief administrators think about privatization: are private solutions really suitable in local government? Turning to these questions we can draw on data from a third study.

Local governmental privatization: suitability and benefits

Privatization as an alternative to core services

Here we turn to a study made by Risto Harisalo: the Kuopio study. The Kuopiodata consists of chief administrators' attitudes to privatization: no information concerning the extent of privatiza-

tion was included in this study. The attitude questionnaire was sent in 1989 to a sample of 229 communes; the respondents included in our data set number 117, i.e. slightly more than half of the original sample.

In the following we will describe chief administrators' attitudes to privatization concerning core services in local government. In the Kuopio questionnaire there were a few "privatized" modes of service provision listed. The chief administrators were asked whether they, if privatizing, would prefer

1. only pure municipal arrangement,
2. contracting out to private entrepreneurs or enterprises,
3. local government giving money grants to citizens who themselves could choose the suitable service forms,
4. production of service that is parallel to municipal service, which citizens could use at their own expense, or
5. that the commune leaves the service production to private producers.

The chief administrators were asked to choose one of these alternatives for many services. We chose only the core services:

- developing trade and industry
- housing
- fire fighting and rescue services
- hospital services
- children's daycare
- service centers for elderly
- primary education
- sporting and outdoor facilities

These core services were summed up to an index - the suitability index. Those chief administrators who chose a private alternative (2-5, above) got value 1, the others zero (the municipal alternative). This suitability index therefore varies between 0 and 9 (we chose nine forms of service). In the following table we can see for how many of these core services the chief administrators would prefer private alternatives.

Table 4. The suitability of privatization in Finnish communes 1989, according to size of population, % (n = 117)

index	-4000	4-8000	8000	total
-2	12.2	25.0	18.2	17.9
4-5	29.3	34.4	36.4	33.3
6-7	31.7	28.1	20.5	22.2
8-	26.8	12.5	25.0	22.2
n =	41	32	44	117

As we can see, the chief administrators prefer core services to be arranged through private alternatives. Almost half of those administrators that could imagine private solutions in providing core services regard private solutions suitable for more than five core services. The base for this rather far-reaching or wide reorientation seems especially to be found in the very smallest communes.

As mentioned in the last chapter only limitation in contracting out is said to be the number of providers. The question is: "Is the demand meeting supply in these small communes" (Starr 1989:20-23)

Benefits of privatization

In the ÅA questionnaire the chief administrators were asked about the benefits of privatization. In this study we had, as mentioned before, two forms of privatization: purchasing service from private entrepreneurs and enterprises and granting support to voluntary activities. The administrators were asked to judge positive effects of these private solutions according to their experience.

Some positive effects were listed in the ÅA questionnaire. The administrators were asked to give their opinions of the following effects regarding the use of purchased services:

- there is decrease in costs
- the quality of service becomes better
- there is more cost-consciousness in other activities.

The statements concerning the granted voluntary activities were:

- there is decrease in costs
- quality becomes better
- the inhabitants are more satisfied because of possibilities to choose

In the table 5 we have summed up only those answers, according to which purchased services and granted support to voluntary activity have at least some positive effects (yes - to a great extent, and yes - to some extent).

As can be seen, there are no big differences between small and large communes. Furthermore, the chief administrators seem to have answered in a similar way regarding the purchased services and the granted activities.

Table 5. Benefits of privatization 1990 according to size of population, % (n = 301)

<i>purchased service</i>	<i>-4 000</i>	<i>4-8 000</i>	<i>8-30 000</i>	<i>30 000-</i>	<i>total</i>
decreased costs	83.3	83.3	84.5	93.8	84.2
better quality	63.5	58.5	58.3	37.5	59.3
cost-consciousness	74.8	83.2	87.3	87.5	81.4
<i>supported activities</i>					
decreased costs	80.2	81.8	83.4	83.4	82.3
better quality	65.2	64.5	62.5	40.0	62.9
more satisfaction	84.8	88.1	92.8	93.3	89.0
n =	113	76	97	15	301

The administrators in the large communes do not believe in better quality as much as the administrators of the other communes. The quality aspect seems to be different from the other aspects. The belief in privatization as a means to better service seems to be stronger, the smaller the commune. Looking at the two other aspects we will notice the opposite tendency. The administrators have not as often seen positive effects of privatization regarding quality compared to the other aspects.

On the whole, there seems to be a vary strong belief in at least these beneficial consequences of privatization.

Local governmental privatization: goals and barriers

Goals and barriers

Within the Kuopio study a number of questions about barriers against and goals for privatization were posed to the chief administrators. Based on a general correlational review of the items, we

chose some goal and some barrier items for further scaling. Nine goal-items were used in an orthogonal factor analysis yielding the following result (n = 117):

With this three-factor solution 62 % of the total variance was explained. The scaling of the variables was from (1) totally disagree to (7) totally agree. It seems easy to interpret the solution. Factor 1 stands primarily for servicedirected goals, privatization is a means toward quality, innovation and flexibility in services. Factor 2 stands for consumer interests, privatization is seen as a means toward consumer independence and choice as well as toward responsiveness in service production. Factor 3 stands for fiscal considerations, privatization is seen as a means toward savings and economic thinking in local government.

We approached the question about barriers in a similar manner. Six barrier-items scaled as the items above were included in our analysis (n = 117):

Table 6. Factor analysis of the Kuopio study: goals (n = 117).

<i>Goals</i>	<i>Factor 1</i>	<i>Factor 2</i>	<i>Factor 3</i>
Improving quality of services	.846	-	-
Developing new services	.697	.293	-
Increasing structural flexibility	.596	-	-
Increasing freedom of choice	.546	.462	-
Increasing consumer independence	-	.830	-
Strengthening consumer influence on large service units	-	.636	.262
Getting to know new needs and problems	-	.584	-
Expenditure savings	-	-	.877
Stimulating economic reasoning	-	-	.862

Table 7. Factor analysis of the Kuopio studies: barriers (n = 117)

Barriers:	Factor 1	Factor 2
Employee union opposition	.881	-
Common views held by unions	.825	-
Threat of losing one's job	.577	-
Threat of losing public monopoly	-	.799
Threat against public nature of services	-	.722
Local governmental steering systems	-	.670

This two factor solution accounted for 57 % of the total variance. Again we seem to have two rather clear scales. Factor 1 stands for union opposition being perceived as an obstacle to privatization. Factor 2 stands for ideological aspects being seen as obstacles. Defensive attitudes with regard to local governmental competence and organization is seen as a hindrance. We could perhaps see this factor as pointing toward a traditional social democratic welfare concept standing in the way of privatization. And here we should point out that the question concerned what factors generally accounted for opposition against privatization within the respective commune. It did not concern the personal attitudes of the respondents.

In order to map the variation in views across communes, we have looked at average factor scores within local governments according to size groups. According to the results (table 8) small communes are primarily guided by service-related goals. We also note that union opposition is not perceived as important. By and large, small communes experience less opposition against privatization than large communes. Socialist parties are relatively weak in these small, mostly agriculturally dominated communes.

Within the large communes opposition against privatization is comparatively stronger. It seems that ideological cleavages can be seen. Ideological opposition is discernible, and consumer interests are seen as important goals. Within these communes socialist parties are stronger and the communes are characterized by dependence on services and industry. Within the intermediate group of communes all goal aspects are judged without enthusiasm, and opposition is primarily related to employee unions.

Table 8. Averages of factor scores and some background variables in three size groups of communes (n = 117)

	Size group		
	-4 000	4-8 000	8 000-
<i>Goals</i>			
services	.15	-.27	.05
consumers	.01	-.28	.20
economy	.08	-.03	-.05
<i>Barriers</i>			
employee unions	-.21	-.15	.08
ideology	.07	-.09	.13
<i>Background variables</i>			
size of population	2583	6089	20352
share of socialists	28%	32%	38%
service employment	37%	44%	51%
industrial employment	27%	28%	34%
n =	41	32	44

By and large we have been able to interpret the results according to "sensible" expectations based on common political notions. What we have not indicated is how the attitudes vary in relation to actual experience of privatization and willingness to privatize. We will now turn to that question.

Volume and suitability, goals and barriers

In order to indicate the relationship between some of the measures we have used, we can use that group of communes which is common to the Kuopio-study and the ÅA-study. Out of the 117 communes within the first study, 95 were included in the second study as well. We shall consider the correlations between the volume and suitability indexes in the two studies and the factor scores reported above. Some background variables are included as well.

We ought first to note that attitudes toward the suitability or desirability of privatization and the actual use of privatized solutions correlate with each other (.184), but they correlate in quite different ways to the other variables included in the analysis. For many variables a positive correlation with volume is paired with a negative correlation with suitability, or the other way around.

Size of population, share of socialists, and industrial employment are positively correlated to actual volume of contracting out and support for voluntary activity. The same variables are, how-

Table 9. Correlations between volume and suitability of privatization, attitudinal factors and some background variables ($n = 95$)

	Suitability index Kuopio	Volume index ÅÅ
<i>Goals</i>		
services	.159	-.011
consumers	.357	.156
economy	.042	-.096
<i>Barriers</i>		
employee unions	-.084	.094
ideology	-.096	-.002
<i>Background variables</i>		
size of population	-.109	.319
share of socialists, %	-.146	.359
industrial employment, %	-.170	.209
service employment, %	.103	.126

ever, negatively correlated to privatization seen as a suitable solution for developing local services. It would seem, then, that privatized solutions have, perhaps, been chosen more as a necessity than a programmatic choice. This necessary development, as we have seen in table 3, will continue, at least according to chief administrators in larger communes.

Perceptions of goals and barriers are not strongly correlated to volume and suitability of privatization. We can note, however, that consumer-related goals do correlate with suitability perceptions and also, although less strongly, with actual volume of privatized solutions. To some extent suitability is also related to service goals.

We should, finally, note that attitudinal factors from the two separate factor solutions can, of course, be correlated. One such correlation is worth our attention. Employee unions are perceived to be an important barrier to privatization especially by those respondents who set fiscal goals for privatization (.340). This correlation at least points in the direction of validity of the data since we can easily imagine that unions are especially concerned in situations in which privatization is used in order to make savings.

Local governmental privatization: a rising controversy

Privatization has advanced rather rapidly in Finnish local government. Mainly it has been a matter

concerning supplementary services. But presently the focus seems to be shifting toward privatization of core welfare state services as well. This development has mainly touched those communes which have a developed market. But we have noted a clear and widespread interest in privatization among small local governmental units as well. New solutions will have to be found for these communes.

The development that we have described has taken place rather spontaneously. It has not been the object of any explicit policy until quite recently. Some free-communes have applied for exceptions from central regulation in order to have a more easy access to private markets. Also, within the health care sector some obstacles to privatization have been removed by central government.

At the explicit policy level, privatization by and large has been something of a taboo. But on this level as well, a change of attitude can be expected. Signs in this direction can be found within the social democratic movement in the Nordic countries – in this background work also Finnish social democrats take part.

Still scepticism to privatization is widespread. Privatizing solutions are adopted more as a necessity than as something voluntarily chosen. Also, from this perspective the development can be expected to continue. The combination of European economic integration and the rapidly deteriorating fiscal situation in local governments leave decision-makers with few choices.

From this necessity we expect a major political controversy to rise. Over the last years unions of public employees have started to wage a battle against privatization (Tämä herra ... 1990). Rather onesided opinion polls have been commissioned in order to prove that people generally expect privatization to increase costs of services.

On the other hand, the interest in quality improvement of public services – a major component of the Finnish administrative policy – has led to extensive studies comparing private and public services. Results clearly indicate that people prefer private to public services within many sectors (Setälä 1988). Summaries of production costs indicate that private solutions are mostly less expensive than public services (Harisalo 1986). In most factual respects benefits seem to outweigh costs if we move toward more flexibility in public services. This simply means that confrontation between unions of public employees and political decision-makers can hardly be avoided.

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