

Folkbildning and Civil Preparedness in Sweden

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Erschienen in:
weiter bilden.
DIE Zeitschrift für Erwachsenen-
bildung
Heft: 1/2026 (33. Jg.)
Disaster Preparedness
Herausgegeben von
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Deutsches Institut für Erwachse-
nenbildung – Leibniz-Zentrum für
Lebenslanges Lernen e.V.
October 13, 2026

Schlagwörter

Schweden
Erwachsenenbildung
Weiterbildung
Bildungsangebot
Lernen
Zivilgesellschaft
Verwundbarkeit
Resilienz
Bevölkerungsschutz
Katastrophenschutz
Krise
Bewältigung
Katastrophe

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Identifizierung Ausgabe
<https://www.die-bonn.de/id/42483>

Identifizierung Beitrag
<https://doi.org/10.58000/ft8k-ym51>
<https://www.die-bonn.de/id/42475>

Zitierempfehlung
Rutgersson, T., & Rohs, M. (2026).
Folkbildning and Civil Prepared-
ness in Sweden. *weiter bilden.*
DIE Zeitschrift für
Erwachsenenbildung, 33(1).
<https://doi.org/10.58000/ft8k-ym51>

Schweden gilt seit dem russischen Angriffskrieg gegen die Ukraine als eines der europäischen Länder, die ihre gesellschaftliche Krisenvorsorge (totalförsvar) am konsequentesten neu ausgerichtet haben – ein Prozess, der 2024 auch im NATO-Beitritt mündete und damit die traditionelle schwedische Neutralitätspolitik grundlegend infrage stellte. Anders als in Deutschland, wo Fragen der Bevölkerungsvorbereitung auf Krisen- und Kriegsszenarien auch kontrovers diskutiert wird, hat sich in Schweden in kurzer Zeit ein pragmatischer gesellschaftlicher Diskurs etabliert, in dem Vorsorge und Wehrhaftigkeit zunehmend als notwendige Voraussetzung für die Verteidigung demokratischer Werte verstanden werden.

Für die deutsche Diskussion um die Rolle der Erwachsenenbildung im Bevölkerungsschutz liefert der schwedische Fall ein besonders instruktives Vergleichsbeispiel: Er zeigt, wie eine zivilgesellschaftlich verankerte, freiwillige Bildungstradition gesellschaftliche Verunsicherung produktiv aufgreifen kann, macht zugleich aber auch die strukturellen Grenzen sichtbar – etwa die Frage der Finanzierung. Im Interview mit Co-Herausgeber Matthias Rohs erläutert Thor Rutgersson, Pressesprecher und internationaler Koordinator des Folkbildningsrådet (des schwedischen Nationalrats für Erwachsenenbildung), welche Rolle die schwedische folkbildning in bisherigen gesellschaftlichen Diskursen hatte und wie sich der aktuelle Diskurs über die Vorbereitung auf Krise und Krieg in Schweden im Vergleich zu Deutschland verschoben hat.

Matthias Rohs: What is the current state of preparedness among the Swedish population, and how does adult education factor into this?

Thor Rutgersson: We carried out a survey on this together with the polling company Novus in May 2025, based on 1,024 respondents; the results are consistent with other surveys conducted by the government's civil-preparedness agency. Two out of three Swedish citizens say they want to learn more about what to do in a time of crisis or possible war and also want to know how to prepare their homes — what to have on hand if water or electricity stops working. About a fifth of respondents said they would like to address this concern by attending a course, and among that group, folkbildning was specifically identified as an attractive way of doing so. People might not have thought of folkbildning spontaneously, but once asked, many recognised it as a suitable option. Preparedness has been an increasingly prominent topic in Swedish adult education over the last few years, particularly since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Swedish government regularly sends a prepared-

ness pamphlet to every household — titled, roughly, "If crisis or war comes", which has been revised more frequently in recent years. Receiving this pamphlet prompts people to start thinking about preparedness.

What country-specific societal factors — historical experience, demographic structure, the folkbildning tradition itself — shape Swedish adult education, and what role does Folkbildningsrådet play in translating these into civil-preparedness work?

Folkbildning as a form of adult education is based on people's own goals and is always free and voluntary; it is closely linked to civil society and popular movements. The idea of the folk high school originally came from Denmark, from Grundtvig, but in Sweden it developed into something deeply tied to people organising themselves. That is precisely why it lends itself to preparedness work: it is natural, in this environment, for people to learn together and to address different topics democratically. Because folkbildning is so closely tied to civil society, it can channel what people are worried about: if someone is concerned about something, they can start a study circle around it. There are also historical precedents of folkbildning addressing societal concerns directly. During the 1970s, as the debate over nuclear power intensified ahead of the 1980 referendum, people used study circles to inform themselves and discuss the issue together. Similarly, during the so-called refugee crisis of 2015 folk high schools and study associations gave room for people's own initiatives. These are two examples of how folkbildning organically responds to what worries or engages people. The COVID-19 pandemic was a different kind of challenge altogether — and one we have not fully recovered from, given the fact that funding for the study associations has been cut. For the folk high schools, the transition was also abrupt. I later wrote a study on this, based on a large number of interviews, and found that some of the solutions developed during that period have persisted and are now used to create more hybrid forms of folkbildning. But for some groups — particularly students with special needs — the transition was rough.

»Folkbildning organically responds to what worries or engages people«

Given this ability to respond to societal concerns, does that put folkbildning in a good position to respond to the current preparedness challenge?

Yes, but many different actors — civil-society organisations as well as more commercial ones — are positioning themselves as key players in preparedness, essentially arguing: give the funding to us. For example, the association representing bygdegårdar, local community buildings mostly in rural areas, has received government funding on the grounds that these buildings are important meeting places in the areas where they operate, and could host preparedness-related activities and courses. In Denmark, by contrast, the

government has allocated funding specifically to adult education for this purpose. So there is currently a situation in Sweden where many organisations are each arguing that they are best placed to address the challenge.

Does folkbildning currently lack the funding to offer courses of this kind at scale?

It is not really accurate to say that there is simply no money. Study associations and folk high schools are free to decide how to use their existing grants – the base grants are not earmarked for anything specific. What many are hoping for, though, is that the government will allocate a dedicated sum specifically for this purpose.

From a German perspective: if we wanted to offer courses on disaster management or civil defence to the whole population, that would require substantial additional funding. Is that also how you see the situation in Sweden — that meeting the need would require more funding than is currently available?

Yes, I would say so — or it would require dropping other activities that folkbildning organisations are already engaged in, which is not really a viable alternative, since those activities matter as well.

Could you describe some of your activities or aims in this area?

In our budget proposal for 2026–2028, we suggested that folkbildning could carry out a national project to strengthen preparedness in times of crisis, with 150 million Swedish kronor (13.5 Mio. Euro) allocated for the purpose. Our aim would be to reach 50,000 people per year with courses on this topic over that period. This proposal was submitted last year and represents Folkbildningsrådet's vision for what could be achieved, but the government has not yet acted on it.

In Germany, there is a highly controversial public debate surrounding the issue of militarization: Many people, including educators, believe that preparing the population for war is not an appropriate role for education and that the focus should instead be on preserving peace. Is there a similarly critical stance in Sweden?

I attended the annual meeting of Svenska Freds, a peace-movement organisation, in May 2026. Almost nobody wants to listen to them at the moment, but their position is that we should not prepare for war, but for peace — that we should train ourselves in how to build peace. Setting aside the complexities of our role in the Second World War, we have not been actively involved in a war for more than two hundred years. When the invasion of Ukraine happened, people began asking themselves what they would do if Sweden were invaded, what they would be willing to risk, and what an open, democratic society actually means once it can no longer be taken for granted.

What would you say is the role of adult education within a genuinely whole-of-society approach to preparedness?

The infrastructure for rolling out courses and study circles at scale already exists within folkbildning. But I think our particular strength goes beyond logistics: it lies in the link to civil society. That, beyond the mere logistics of delivery, is why I think folkbildning is uniquely positioned to contribute to this.

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