

Summary

Background

At the time of writing, a pandemic that has hit the world hard is continuing its course. To limit the transmission of the disease COVID-19, extraordinary measures have been taken by governments around the world, including in Sweden. Things that we otherwise take for granted – free mobility and socialising freely – have been restricted or cancelled completely. We have got used to media, politicians and public authorities informing us every day about the spread of infection, death tolls, mutations, antibody tests and vaccines. Companies in certain industries have experienced how demand for their goods or services has collapsed; support packages have been launched on a scale never seen before; and, for many people, their home has become synonymous with their workplace. 2020 was a tumultuous year.

There is a recurring discussion about how best to manage the pandemic and about whether and, if so, when we will be able to return to a normal situation. There are no simple answers about how to combat the pandemic, or what awaits us when it eventually abates. Will new habits last? Will we be able to attend to the deficiencies exposed during the pandemic? What can we learn so as to be better equipped to cope with new similar situations?

The purpose of this anthology is to gather knowledge and present a number of perspectives around various circumstances and questions that have arisen – or more clearly come to light – during the pandemic. Even though it is early days yet, what lessons can we learn and what can we expect of future developments? The Expert Group on Public Economics (ESO) has asked a number of researchers and experts in various disciplines to provide input on a question close to them. To the extent possible, each author has

started from previous research, both their own and that of others. At the same time, for natural reasons the events of the past year have not yet been well illuminated and researched. The anthology therefore also contains personal thoughts and reflections about a state of affairs that is still proceeding.

The result is a report that contains chapters dealing with such varied questions as legal and ethical balances and the division of responsibilities and cooperation between different actors in society. It also treats the effects of the pandemic on transport and the transition to more working from home and to digital communication. Finally, there is also a chapter that takes up the question of whether the fiscal policy framework needs to be adjusted in the wake of the crisis. The subjects thus range over a broad field, which serves to bring out the breadth and complexity of the questions raised by the pandemic. But the report still leaves out big and important questions that could be treated in a publication about the effects of the pandemic.

One such question is international aspects: from living in a strongly globalised world we have, in the past year, experienced a more restricted world and a degree of protectionist tendencies. Will the aftermath of the pandemic bring stronger or weaker international cooperation? Another is the climate question: will climate and environmental issues have to give ground in the rush to get the wheels of the economy rolling again. Or will the measures we have seen to prevent the spread of infection open the way for powerful measures to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases? These questions are sure to be the subject of future discussions, but they are not gone into here; and they can probably benefit from being treated more fully in other publications.

Governance and information for decisions in an extraordinary situation

The anthology begins with the chapter "*How does Sweden's legislation function in exceptional situations?*" in which Annika Lundius gives a general overview of the principles and laws that form the basis for the government of the Realm. Lundius discusses their implications for how it has been possible to manage the situation

that has arisen – the pandemic and the action to reduce the spread of infection in society.

The chapter "*Inescapable decisions in a period of spin and implicit values*" by Nils-Eric Sahlin and Sylvia Schwaag Serger discusses how researchers have interacted with decision-makers during the crisis and the difficulty of making decisions with no or insufficient knowledge.

This is followed by the chapter "*Ethical balances in pandemic times*" by Gustaf Arrhenius, Krister Bykvist, Folke Tersman and Rebecca Thorburn Stern in which the authors note that it has not been clear how essential ethical balances between different values have been reached during the pandemic. They discuss ways of creating more openness around such balances and propose attaching an ethical advisory council to the Public Health Agency of Sweden.

Responsibility and coordination

In the chapter "*Crisis management: Central coordination and local collaboration*" Erna Danielsson and Susanna Öhman discuss how central guidelines and coordination contribute to facilitating collaboration at local level in the event of major disruptions to society.

The contribution "*Who should take responsibility?*" by Anne-Marie Lindgren also focuses on the division of responsibilities between different actors in society. She focuses particularly on health care and care of older people during the pandemic and uses examples from those areas to discuss advantages and disadvantages of the present division of responsibilities.

Changed habits – lasting or not?

In the chapter "*Working from home in the light of the pandemic – about digital tools and managing borders*" Ulf Melin gives a picture of the rapid transition to distance-working that has taken place during the pandemic. He discusses the consequences of more working from home in the form of increased use of digital tools, but also what it means for the dividing line between private life and working life.

In the following chapter “*Will we travel more or less after the pandemic?*” Jonas Eliasson considers how travel has changed during the pandemic, and, based on what it was like in the past, he discusses what we can think about the development of travel in the future.

Implications for the fiscal policy framework

The support packages that have been put in place during the pandemic have dug holes in public finances. In the final chapter of the anthology, “*The fiscal policy framework after the COVID-19 pandemic*”, Fredrik N G Andersson and Lars Jonung therefore discuss the fiscal policy framework and whether it needs to be changed in the wake of the pandemic.

Concluding comments

The authors in the anthology have had different angles on the pandemic and have dealt with different areas and issues. Looking beyond the interesting analyses and conclusions, sometimes of a more tentative nature, to be found in each chapter, is it possible to also find any common denominators? Are there any general conclusions to be drawn from these highly individual contributions? The starting point for the anthology has not been to draw general conclusions from the report as a whole, but it is not possible to disregard the fact that some recurring features also make appearances in several of the various chapters.

The value of having good preparedness

Getting good preparedness ahead of a crisis situation is of central importance. This involves having legislation in place that is able to regulate exceptional situations and sets of regulations that can be activated when the crisis happens. Exercises in crisis situations need to be held in “normal conditions” so as to clarify the responsibilities of different actors. When something like emergency supplies are to be regarded as a national concern, it is also reasonable for the State to have a responsibility for it. Good preparedness also means having

stable public finances, where there is an adequate margin to the situation where public indebtedness would be costly for society.

Important that researchers meet within and between disciplines

In the pandemic it has become clear that different scientific disciplines need to be involved so as to contribute their knowledge. A number of authors with different scientific backgrounds have participated in the anthology and if the references given are also included, a number of additional disciplines are represented. Having a one-dimensional view is too much of a limitation both when it comes to stopping transmission of the infection and when the issue is how to shape continued developments. The debate during the pandemic should therefore be more nuanced and level-headed; opponents should listen more to one another and respond to one another's arguments in a more constructive way. No single science, researcher or expert is in possession of the knowledge about what measures are well balanced in the pandemic.

Good adaptability in society

Despite criticism about how people in Sweden have complied with advice and recommendations during the pandemic, the adaptability of society still appears to be remarkable. This anthology has dealt with how health care has mobilised, how different actors have been able to cooperate (despite often deficient structures for doing so), how different digital tools have been put to use and travel has decreased (even though it is uncertain whether this will last). Here, it can be added that even though this anthology has not dealt explicitly with the work of the Government Offices during the pandemic, that authority also has to be credited with a high degree of adaptability. The same also applies to other parts of Swedish public administration that have suddenly found themselves at the centre of this extensive crisis. There are, quite generally, good reasons to also build on the adaptability displayed by society during the pandemic in the future.