

Foreword

Europe still has almost 16 million registered unemployed. The number of those who would like to have a job is even higher. A decent job and an adequate standard of living are universal aspirations but, at the present time, opportunities to meet these aspirations are frequently lacking. Most European societies need improvements in employment, stronger increases in productivity, economic growth and reform of their welfare systems. The shortcomings are partly attributable to the way the market economy operates, the economic and political orthodoxy prevailing in Europe, and the hitherto less than successful implementation of the EU's Lisbon Strategy. Yet, not all European countries suffer from these kinds of problem; the exceptions include the Nordic countries: Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland.

The original Lisbon strategy adopted in 2000 set ambitious goals, with a roadmap for achieving them and quantitative targets for 2010. Yet the mid-term reviews and revisions of the strategy in 2005 seem to have weakened its social elements and welfare component, and there is a danger that employment goals and measures to combat unemployment and social exclusion may receive less priority than the economic goals of competitiveness and price stabilisation. We believe that EU policies and European discussions can benefit greatly from close attention to the policies and experiences of the Nordic countries. Although it is impossible to 'export' a system, as a shot in the arm for political strategic thinking and for developing employment-friendly policies, lessons from the Nordic approaches to growth and welfare can be of considerable value. There thus would seem to be a rather urgent need for information about the Nordic countries and knowledge of their experiences of governance.

While the Nordic countries also experienced crisis at the beginning of the 1990s, the ways in which they sought to tackle recession, unemployment and social exclusion, and the nature of the governance structures that were successful in introducing change are definitely of relevance for a broader European public. Fifteen years ago it was commonly held that the Nordic countries were neither sustainable nor competitive. Yet they have been rising, Phoenix-like, to the top of all kinds of international rankings as to economic and social development. The most developed welfare states in the world have also become some of the most economically competitive countries. How has this happened and what are the secrets of the Nordic countries'

strong performance and the particular features of their labour market and welfare regimes? What explains this performance in the fields of employment, economic growth, mobility, welfare and equality?

Alongside shared features, there are important differences between the Nordic countries and these will also be highlighted in this book. The way in which cooperative adaptation to changing external and internal circumstances has taken place in each of the four countries provides useful insights into the political and professional room for manoeuvre enjoyed in the different systems. Our intention is, first and foremost, to document how good governance has been developed in the Nordic countries and, in so doing, to propose some relevant lessons for European decision-makers as well as academics and commentators.

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