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Tackling social exclusion and rising tensions in Sweden's suburbs

*Update on Programme Development
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Current situation

Over the last decade, several European cities have witnessed a rising tide of social protests and riots by young people. These manifestations, which have at times led to violent confrontation and destruction of property, have been largely viewed as a reaction to increasing economic inequalities, lack of meaningful opportunities in life, as well as general social marginalization.

Several of Sweden's larger cities have also experienced such protests and riots. For example, some of Stockholm's suburbs home to populations with immigrant backgrounds, such as Husby and Tensta, experienced social unrest in 2012 and 2013. Even more recently, in May 2015, a small riot broke out in Tensta. The riots have brought to light some of the underlying challenges facing Swedish society today, such as the widening socio-economic gap between the "native" Swedes and those with an immigrant background.

While media coverage in Sweden has further reinforced the portrayal of these relatively marginalized suburbs and neighbourhoods as unsafe and even dangerous, the latest incidents nevertheless highlight the real urgency and need to create spaces for dialogue to start addressing underlying grievances

¹ In 2014 Interpeace launched a pilot project in Tensta to assess whether its participatory and inclusive peacebuilding methodology could inform strategies seeking to address rising social tensions and episodes of violence in Sweden's suburbs. Interpeace carried out consultations with a broad range of stakeholders, including teachers, police, religious leaders, families and representatives of civil society. The key objective of the consultation process was to better

and the frustrations of those living in the shadows of Sweden's major cities.

Critical challenges threatening the social fabric of Sweden's society

There is growing understanding of the diverse challenges fuelling social discontent in the socio-economically marginalized suburbs in Sweden. A recent consultative process carried out by Interpeace¹ in Tensta, a suburb of Stockholm, shed light on the critical challenges threatening social cohesion in Sweden's urban environments. These are: identity, marginalization and socio-economic challenges.

IDENTITY. Issues related to identity, such as **discrimination based on colour, nationality or level of Swedish language skills, as well as difficulties in defining a person's own identity in the socio-cultural setting of Swedish society**, are key factors contributing to the feeling of social exclusion, particularly among the youth. While Sweden has had a long history of welcoming migrants, many of the newcomers with a foreign background have trouble finding their place in the Swedish society.

MARGINALIZATION. **Spatial segregation between wealthier and poorer neighbourhoods, perceived neglect by state authorities, as well as the negative portrayal in the Swedish media of**

understand the challenges and opportunities that people, and youth in particular, face in Tensta today. The dynamics and results of the pilot process were captured in a report entitled *Voices from Tensta*. A short video documentary, entitled *Dreams from Tensta*, was produced by local youth and further explored the aspirations and key challenges facing the local community.

neighbourhoods with relatively large immigrant populations all contribute to a sense of marginalization. Despite being geographically close to the centres of major cities, residents in neighbourhoods such as Tensta, Husby and Rosengård feel increasingly excluded and disconnected from the rest of Swedish society.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES. High levels of unemployment, limited economic means and the absence of public spaces to socialize in, all have considerable influence on the social wellbeing of residents, and youth in particular, in Sweden's urban neighbourhoods. Furthermore, the lack of sufficient resources in education and early employment², the primary channels through which young people become integrated in the society, is causing growing concern. Difficult socio-economic conditions often lead to rising levels of criminality, notably among vulnerable groups such as young people and newcomers to Sweden.

Options for action: how to address social exclusion and rising tensions in Sweden's urban environments?

In light of Interpeace's work in Tensta and the growing understanding of these urban dynamics, future efforts in addressing rising social discontent and the widening gap between socio-economically diverging urban communities in Sweden should focus on the following:

Improving the image of marginalized suburbs in the Swedish media: the overly negative image in local and national media of suburbs with large immigrant populations reinforces the feeling of marginalization and overshadows positive assets such as multiculturalism and diversity.

Providing youth with places to socialize: safe and supervised environments would allow youth to better socialize and interact with members of their communities.

Supporting families with immigrant backgrounds to address generational and cultural gaps: finding a balance between the social and cultural expectations of parents with "traditional" backgrounds and their children growing up in the "modern" Swedish society can defuse pressure and solve misunderstandings within families.

Enhancing dialogue between youth and law enforcement: increasing positive interactions between the police and urban youth, outside of formal settings, can serve to address tensions and frequent confrontations.

Helping people to find the right kind of support: guiding residents with foreign backgrounds, particularly those with limited Swedish language skills, to the domain of relevant social services and support can go a long way in solving common problems and strengthening trust in local and state authorities.

The way forward

Building on the positive experience of Interpeace's pilot project in 2014 and requests by the local stakeholders to continue its work, **Interpeace is currently working on a strategy for long-term engagement in Sweden.**

More specifically, Interpeace is seeking to implement **a programme to contribute to changing views and attitudes on how suburbs and their residents are perceived in Sweden.**

The programme will use **dialogue as a means of bringing people together to discuss issues of concern, challenges, as well as opportunities** to work collectively towards harmonious social relations in the areas of concern. Given the critical importance of issues surrounding youth, **the programme will put a special focus on youth engagement.**

The programme will seek to continue to engage with a wide range of stakeholders from the community, the larger district administration and the wider Swedish society. The programme will gradually expand to other neighbourhoods in Sweden, such as Rosengård in Malmö, and to districts where challenges of social exclusion are less visible, in order to assess sources of resilience and positive strengths.

In the next few months, Interpeace will seek to **raise awareness of its activities in Tensta and engage with potential partners to secure long-term funding** for the programme. As a part of Interpeace's ongoing efforts and commitment to the local community in Tensta, Interpeace is organizing a report launch event and panel discussion in Tensta on June 10, 2015.

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² Svenska Dagbladet, "Stockholm's jobbplan för unga havererade direkt", May 28th, 2015.