

Reform of the Employment and Welfare Administrations – the Challenges of Co-ordinating Diverse Public Organisations

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Preface

This paper is part of the research project «Regulation, Control and Auditing», funded by the Norwegian Research Council. The paper was presented at «The coordination of public sector organizations in the era of joined-up government and marketization», EGPA Study Group on Governance of Public Sector Organizations, EGPA Conference, Bocconi University, Milan, 6–9 Sep, 2006. We would like to thank Øyvind Haugneland for valuable help.

Summary

This paper addresses one of the most comprehensive structural reforms in recent Norwegian administrative history: a merger of the *employment and national insurance administrations*, combined with more formal collaboration with the local government *social services administration*. The reform can be seen as a «*whole-of-government*» initiative intended to increase the co-ordinative capacity of government to address «wicked problems» cutting across existing policy areas and government levels in a multi-level governance system. This paper examines the following questions: First, what characterises the organisational thinking related to this reform? Second, how can we understand the reform process in terms of a transformative perspective combining instrumental, cultural and environmental features? Third, what would we expect to be the greatest specialisation and co-ordination challenges of the chosen structure? Fourth, what are the potential effects and implications of the new structure for political control and institutional autonomy, for relations between central and local administrations, and for the main goals stated?

Sammendrag

Dette notatet fokuserer på NAV-reformen som er en av de mest omfattende reformer i nyere norsk forvaltningshistorie. A-etat og Trygdevesenet slås sammen i en ny Arbeids- og velferdsforvaltning som samtidig skal ha et formelt samarbeid med de kommunale sosialkontorene. Et viktig formål med reformen er å styrke den horisontale samordningen for å håndtere problemer som oppstår i spenningsfeltet mellom ulike sektorer og forvaltningsnivåer. Dette notatet undersøker hva som karakteriserer organisasjonstenkningen knyttet til denne reformen og hvordan vi kan forstå reformprosessene med utgangspunkt i et transformativt perspektiv som kombinerer instrumentelle, kulturelle faktorer og trekk ved omgivelsene. Vi fokuserer på utfordringer knyttet til spesialisering og samordning som den valgte løsningen medfører. Notatet tar også opp potensielle effekter og implikasjoner av den nye strukturen på reformens hovedmål, på politisk styring og institusjonell autonomi og på relasjonene mellom statlig og kommunalt nivå.

Introduction

This paper addresses one of the largest reforms of public-sector co-ordination in recent Norwegian administrative history: a merger of the *employment and national insurance administrations* into a new employment and welfare administration, combined with more formal collaboration between this new administration and the local government *social services administration*. The aims of the reform are to create jobs and to make the administration more user-friendly, more holistic and more efficient. The reform can be seen as a «*whole-of-government*» (WOG) initiative intended to increase the capacity of government to address «wicked problems» cutting across existing policy areas and to improve vertical and horizontal coordination in the fields of policy and implementation.

The WOG approach can be interpreted as a reaction to the New Public Management (NPM) reforms which have dominated reform efforts in many countries over the last two decades (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). The NPM focus on vertical specialisation or devolution and on horizontal differentiation, based on the principle of «single-purpose organizations», has made the public apparatus in many countries rather fragmented (Christensen and Lægreid 2001). Even though this development may have brought some advantages – such as clearer visions and goals, more professional autonomy, more easily measurable performance and results, clearer accountability and greater use of incentives – two of the major problems of fragmentation seem to be political control and coordination. These concerns are at the forefront of the post-NPM reforms now emerging in several countries, including the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, which were NPM trail-blazers (see Christensen and Lægreid 2006a).

As a response to the increased fragmentation caused by previous reform programs, these countries have adopted co-ordination and integration strategies. In the second generation of modern public-sector reforms there has been a shift of emphasis away from structural devolution, disaggregation and single-purpose organisations and towards a whole-of-government approach (Christensen and Lægreid 2006b). The slogans «joined-up-government» and «whole-of-government» have provided new labels for the old doctrine of co-ordination in the study of public administration (Hood 2005). In addition to the issue of co-ordination, the problem of integration was also a main concern behind these reform initiatives (Mulgan 2005). While the terms are new, they represent old problems. Attempts to co-ordinate government policy-making and service delivery across organisational boundaries are not a new phenomenon (Ling 2002, Richards and Kavanagh 2000).

The scope of WOG is pretty broad. One can distinguish between WOG *polycymaking* and WOG *implementation*, between *horizontal linkages* and *vertical linkages*, and the targets for WOG initiatives can be a group, a locality or a policy sector (see Pollitt 2003a). WOG activities may span any or all levels of government and also involve groups outside government. It is about joining up at the top, but also about joining up at the base, enhancing local level integration and involving public-private partnerships. The WOG concept does not represent a coherent set of ideas and tools but can best be seen as an umbrella term describing a set of responses to the problem of increased fragmentation of the public sector and public services and a wish to increase co-ordination (see Ling 2002).

WOG can therefore be seen as a reaction to the «silozation» or «pillarization» of the public sector that seems to be typical for the NPM reforms (Gregory 2006, Pollitt 2003a). The principle of «single-purpose organisations», with many specialised and non-overlapping roles and functions, may have produced too much fragmentation, self-centred authorities and lack of co-operation and co-ordination, hence hampering effectiveness and efficiency (Boston and Eichbaum 2005: 21).

WOG is seen by some as an efficiency measure and an answer to budgetary pressure, contradictory though that may sound following the introduction of organised fragmentation in the name of efficiency under NPM. A vertical tightening of the system combined with increased horizontal collaboration may now be seen as more efficient than a more fragmented system, with a focus mainly on efficiency in service delivery. Progress in ICT technology has reduced the cost of horizontal communication and co-ordination, the influence of community expectations and consumerism means that citizens want services that better meet their needs, and there has been a shift of intellectual attention away from atomistic models and towards a greater emphasis on holistic approaches (Mulgan 2005).

WOG-type coordination can take many forms, from smart practice and various new co-ordinative efforts, without structural changes, to organisational mergers and other structural co-ordinative measures. We will address the general question of how post-NPM related reforms are formulated and designed, both in terms of process features – including the organisational thinking informing them – and in terms of the perceived effects of the reforms. How do political and administrative actors argue about such reforms and what are their potential effects and implications?

In Norway administrative reforms at the central level have generally neglected co-operation across sectors. Major reform measures, such as performance management, performance auditing, monitoring and control, have first and foremost been directed at the vertical, sector-based dimension of public administration (Christensen and Læg Reid 2001). Other reform measures, such as structural devolution through the formation of state-owned companies and semi-autonomous regulatory agencies, have, however, increased fragmentation and challenged vertical co-ordination. As a result of these movements, horizontal co-ordination between sectors has become more difficult at the central level. One consequence is that it is difficult to establish cross-ministerial co-operation in policy areas (Fimreite and Læg Reid 2005).

By contrast, reform tendencies at the local level in Norway are more or less the opposite. In local government sectors have formally been merged and specialisation principles other than sectoral have become more important. Local horizontal co-ordination has become easier, but at the same time the sector-based relationship between the central and local levels, so important in the Norwegian welfare state, has suffered (Tranvik and Fimreite 2006).

In a multi-level system WOG approaches can also be a remedy for this relationship. Multi-level governance is the term for a government system where tasks and functions are carried out at different levels of government, implying an increased interdependence of public agencies operating at different territorial levels, often in a complex system of overlapping jurisdictions (Marks and Hooghe 2004, Bache and Flinders 2004). The

functions can rarely be treated independently of each other, the different levels have to collaborate, and co-ordination between levels is important.

In the Norwegian welfare state, the sectoral principle has traditionally been an important mechanism for co-ordination between different levels. However, when this principle ceases to be the main mechanism at the lowest level, co-ordination between levels becomes a challenge. It is this challenge that the WOG-initiative we are focusing on in this paper is intended to meet – by formally integrating services that are both central government responsibilities (employment and national insurance administration) and the responsibility of local government (social services). The multi-level aspect is further emphasised by the fact that different government levels have to co-ordinate tasks at the same territorial level and under the same leadership in the «one-stop-shop» arrangements in municipalities.

As of 2006 the former National Insurance Administration (NIA) and the Directorate of Labour (DOL) in Norway are being merged into a single central agency for employment and welfare (NAV). Locally the NAV is establishing a one-stop shop system together with the social services administration. This front-line service is supposed to be run as a central-local partnership regulated by local agreements. Central government does not, however, assume local government responsibilities or vice versa. The reform is therefore also an important component of multi-level governance.

This paper will address the following questions: First, what characterises the organizational thinking related to the establishment of NAV in a system of multi-level governance? Second, how can we understand the reform process in terms of a transformative perspective, combining instrumental, cultural and environmental features? Third, what would we expect to be the greatest challenges of the chosen structure for specialisation and co-ordination? Fourth, what are the potential effects and implications of the new structure for political control and institutional autonomy, for relations between the central and local administrations and for the main goals stated?

Our empirical data are based mainly on an analysis of public documents. Before we elaborate further on the reform, we will give a brief introduction to the Norwegian political and administrative context, in particular to the three services that will be affected by the NAV reform.

The Norwegian context

The broad picture

Norway is a unitary, parliamentary and multi-party state with a small population spread over a rather large geographical area. Since the early 1970s, it has been ruled by minority governments, but this changed in 2005 when the Stoltenberg Red–Green majority coalition came to power. There is a strong democratic tradition in Norway, and collectivist and egalitarian values are important (Christensen 2003). Consensus-orientation is crucial, the level of internal conflicts is low, and corporatist arrangements are well developed. Per capita income is relatively high and there is an abundance of natural resources. The level of labour market participation in Norway is high, also

among women and elderly people, and the unemployment rate is one of the lowest in Europe.

Norway has a significant tradition of local self-government. Local authorities with their own elected democratic institutions have wide competencies. The Norwegian welfare state is one of the most comprehensive and universal in the world, with a large public sector. In the Norwegian model welfare politics are mostly decided at the central level, but they are adapted to local circumstances and implemented by local government. Local government is responsible for social welfare, elementary schools, care of the elderly and health care and thus constitutes a major part of the public sector both in terms of the number of employees and in terms of financial resources. The relationship between central and local government is a mixture of political decentralisation, based on the principle of local autonomy, and administrative decentralisation, based on the principle of delegated authority.

Political control over the civil service has been general and passive, allowing the executive considerable leeway. This seems to reflect some major features of the political-administrative system: high levels of mutual trust and shared attitudes and norms among political and administrative leaders, within the public sector in general and in the relationship between central and local authorities (Christensen and Læg Reid 2005, Fimreite et al. 2004). The level of trust in public institutions in Norway is generally higher than in most other countries (Norris 1999).

The existing employment and welfare organisation

The *Norwegian Public Employment Service*, headed by the Directorate of Labour (DOL), is about 120 years old and for a long time had a monopoly on its main services. Traditionally it has been seen as a major instrument of full employment, but during the last decade it has been modernised, diversified (so that it is now a multi-task organisation) and has had to compete with private providers of personnel/jobs. The service has around 3,800 full-time positions and is represented at all three levels of government: nationally through the DOL, regionally through its 18 regional offices and locally through its 162 local offices. The employment service holds responsibility for the operative implementation of the labour market policy of the government. In the course of 2004 about 466,400 persons were registered as active job-seekers. Its main task is to help people find a new job as quickly as possible, by helping them to carry out an active job search, providing personal advice, and helping them to gain additional qualifications. The service's tasks also include researching the labour market, distributing economic benefits and control.

The *National Insurance Service*, headed by its central agency the National Insurance Administration (NIA), is also an old administrative apparatus. It has about 7,600 full-time positions, is represented in every county and municipality in Norway and handles more than 6 million cases annually. Close to 2 million persons receive regular benefits from the insurance service. The service is regulated by several laws, the main one being the National Insurance Law, which has three main goals: to provide economic security via a guaranteed income, to compensate citizens for expenses related to unemployment, pregnancy, maternity, single-parenthood, illness and injury, disability, old age and death

– reallocation of income and living conditions – and to help people to cope or help themselves on a daily basis.

In contrast to the two other services, which are run by the central government, the *social welfare service* is the responsibility of the autonomous municipalities. Like the other services, it also has a long history. Responsibility for the poor (which eventually developed into a social security service) was one of two functions (the other was elementary schools) assigned to the Norwegian municipalities when they were formally established in 1837. Social welfare services are generally meant to provide a local social security net in the Norwegian welfare state. The services are regulated by the social services law and their main aims are: furthering economic and social security, improving the living conditions of underprivileged people, increasing social (and gender) equality, preventing social problems, and helping the individual to live and reside independently and lead an active and meaningful life in collaboration with others. In 2003 the municipal social welfare services had around 4,100 positions and about 135,400 persons were receiving financial assistance.

The three types of services involved in the reorganisation were all affected in different ways by two structural ministerial changes: the first in 2003, when labour and social services were gathered in the same ministry, and the second in 2005, when the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion was established and assigned responsibility both for these services and for immigration administration. Together they employ 16,000 people, are responsible for about 30 billion Euros annually, and have about half of the Norwegian population as users or clients. A number of concerns related to these factors had a bearing on the preparation for the reform we are looking into: one is that around 700,000 persons of working age are either wholly or partially out of work at any given time. Another concern is that many users encounter a divided and sometimes fragmented administration. This is especially a problem for users who need help from more than one of the agencies and assistance that involves several services and government levels. A third concern is that having three services each dedicated to their particular area of responsibilities may potentially create areas for which no-one is responsible. Therefore one of the aims of the reform is to reduce the likelihood of such areas emerging.

Theoretical approach

Theory can be used in several ways. In this paper we will use it to describe the content of the reform, to explain the reform process and to point to challenges and possible effects. We will start by introducing a framework for categorisation based on a theory of specialisation and co-ordination in a multi-level system. Thereafter we will present a more explanatory framework based on a transformative perspective.

The problem of co-ordination and specialisation in a multi-level system

The reform analysed here is mainly about changing the principles of specialisation and the forms of co-ordination (see Wollmann 2003). Co-ordination and co-ordination mechanisms are challenged when the principles of organisational specialisation undergo

change (Verhoerst and Bouckaert 2005). The principle of specialisation is concerned with defining which tasks and relations can be grouped together and co-ordinated and which can be separated. In addition, different specialisation principles will enhance different networks, identities and conflict patterns. An organisation specialised according to geographical area served will encourage policy makers to primarily pay attention to particular territorial concerns. Sectoral specialisation, on the other hand, has a tendency to weaken relations that have been developed territorially, for example, based on geographical units such as municipalities, and to strengthen policy standardisation across territorial units.

Redesigning sectorally specialised organisations into geographically structured ones will thus tend to transform functional conflicts into territorial conflicts (Egeberg 2001, 2004). Generally, increased specialisation results in an increased need for co-ordination (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004), but which specialisation principle is to be selected will be of considerable significance for the choice of co-ordinating mechanisms. In the reform studied, sector and territory as principles of organisation will be active at the same time. Three sectors are involved, as are three levels of government. The NAV service offices are also to be situated at the most local level, and the central government organisation is to have regional branches. It is important to understand how different mechanisms of co-ordination fit together with this complicated set of specialisation principles and will be addressed in our presentation of the reform as well as in the formulation of expectations.

A transformative perspective

Our explanatory point of departure is a transformative approach, focusing on the complex contexts in which political and administrative actors operate while trying to further reforms (Christensen and Læg Reid 2001). An *instrumental perspective* emphasises the relevance of structural factors for reform processes and effects and assumes that certain actors in certain structural positions have easier access to and more influence over decisions than others. Reforms are often dominated by leaders and selected experts. The decision-making structure in public organisations – the structure of participants – may be dominated by leaders in certain hierarchical positions or else there may be more collegial and balanced structures where several leaders are supposed to exert influence on a relatively equal basis. It is further taken for granted that such leaders will score high on clear means-end thinking or rational calculation, i.e. they will have relatively unambiguous intentions and goals and insight into the possible consequences of decisions and reorganisations (Dahl and Lindblom 1953). The access structure – the structure of problems and solutions – is either dominated by a few leaders and their problems and solutions, or else there is a tug-of-war between leaders and experts with different interests and arguments.

In the present case, using this perspective means focussing on the central political and administrative actors and their patterns of influence and organisational thinking. Central questions are: Is the reform process dominated by the political leadership or is it characterised by negotiations about reform solutions? Are the arguments and reasoning connected to the main organisational models and solutions chosen unambiguous? And

more specifically – what arguments do the leaders use to connect the main goals with the co-ordinative solutions? Finally, what effects and implications might be expected of the main model chosen?

The other perspective used is a *cultural* one. Public organisations have histories and traditions characterised by certain key informal norms and values, and this path-dependency has a bearing on reform processes and effects (Selznick 1957, Krasner 1988). If reforms are incompatible with these traditions, they will either be obstructed or modified (Brunsson and Olsen 1993). In our case, we ask how these traditions will influence the reform process and the effects thereof. How easily will the reform be accepted by the three administrations/services involved? What is the relevance of cultural resistance? And what might be the role of cultural resistance in obtaining the desired effects?

A third perspective focuses on *environmental* features. These can be divided into two categories: technical and institutional (Scott 1998). The technical environment involves certain specific problems in and pressure from the environment – for example, the need to lower unemployment and to make the existing apparatus for employment and welfare more effective and efficient. The institutional environment is related to myths and symbols about how public administrations should be organised (Meyer and Rowan 1977), in our case about which of the various co-ordination models should be chosen. We will analyse what relevance the environment has for both the reform process and reform effects. Is the reasoning behind the reform and the models chosen connected to pressure from the technical environment, reflected in instrumental thinking and predicted effects? Or is the relevance of the institutional environment more evident, implying that solutions will be of a symbolic nature and involve ambiguous thinking, leading one to expect few real effects?

We now turn to the empirical part of the paper. We will first describe the reform process by focusing on the organisational aspects and then analyse the process using a transformative approach combining instrumental, cultural and environmental features. Finally, we will describe the challenges of specialisation and co-ordination posed by the chosen model.

The reform process

Main features

The process leading up to the final decision in the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget) in 2005 about a major reorganisation of the employment and welfare administrations can be divided into two major phases. We will focus on the latter. The first phase started with the declaration of the Bondevik I government in 2001, stating its intention to co-ordinate the municipal social services with the government insurance administration and labour market/employment service. This part of the reform process was labelled SATS. The government's proposal, which was based on the work of an inter-ministerial working group, was that the administration should continue to be divided into three parts (pensions, labour and social services), but a one-stop shop at the local level should be created encompassing the latter two services (St.meld. nr. 14 (2002–2003)).

The Cabinet was heavily criticised for this proposal, since it failed to respond to the Storting's request for a number of different models for a merger of the three administrations or services. The Storting, therefore, returned the proposal to the government and asked it to consider various models for one joint welfare agency consisting of «today's labor Market administration, National Insurance Service and the social welfare service». The government was thus compelled to start the procedure anew.

The second phase of the process started with this renewed demand from the legislature. This time the government decided to establish an external public commission, consisting primarily of experts. The commission was established in 2003, and its mandate was to discuss the main question of co-ordination and the merger once more. However, the proposal the commission (NOU 2004: 13) came up with turned out to be pretty similar to the rejected proposal. It stated that there should be one administration for income and employment, one for pensions and rights, and one for social services, and that the latter should remain a local government responsibility. Understandably, the government was reluctant to present the Storting with a new proposal that was almost the same as the rejected one. It therefore proposed dividing the administration into two parts, consisting of a merger of the employment and insurance administrations, and a separate administration for social services. The introduction of a one-stop shop arrangement at the local level created the illusion that the two services were holistic/integrated, while in reality this consisted of two administrations collaborating with one another. The merged employment and insurance administrations remained a central government responsibility, while the social services continued to be administered by local government. This time the Storting accepted the proposal, even though it did not fulfill its original demand for a real merger and co-ordination. We will now present the main features of this latter phase of the process by focusing on the organisational thinking and design.¹

The Commission's report

The public commission's mandate covered two major aspects, one substantial and one more related to organisational questions. The first, substantial aspect described the main aims of reorganising the employment and welfare administration as: getting more people into work and reducing the number of people dependent on insurance schemes and social services; creating a more user-friendly welfare administration; and making the administration generally more efficient. It also emphasised the need to examine whether users with many and complex needs received a co-ordinated service. The second, organisational aspect was to discuss and evaluate the suitability of the various organisational models for fulfilling the main goals, among them a model with a single co-ordinated/merged administration. An interesting aspect of this mandate was that, although its first proposal had been sent back by the Storting, the government did not try to limit the options of the commission, a degree of leeway the commission definitely utilised in its work.

¹ Some of the main analytical arguments and interpretations in this section is inspired by Haugneland (2006).

A reference group for the committee was set up consisting of members of user organisations, social partners, the National Association of Local and Regional Authorities, government agencies and other affected parties. The commission submitted the report in June 2004 and it was distributed to a broad selection of bodies for comment to be returned by November 2004.

The report concluded that the main goals of labour market policy had generally been fulfilled, albeit with room for improvement for special groups like the unemployed, immigrants and older people in the workforce. The commission was more critical of the user-orientation of the administrations involved, and pointed to the fact that about 15% of the 2.4 million users of the employment and welfare administration had needs that encompassed more than one of the three separate administrations. Even though this figure was somewhat problematic to specify exactly, another important finding was that the longer an individual held the status of a multi-service user, the greater the involvement of more than one type of service. The commission viewed finding a better solution for this group as one of the main aims of the reform. Concerning efficiency, the report stated that centralisation of services meant that the need for direct contact with users was minor and that therefore money could probably be saved. The report also stated that the main goals of the reform could be fulfilled by using reorganisation of the apparatus as an instrument, since the services were originally designed to respond to other needs and contexts.

Against this background the report outlined and discussed the following four models:

Figure 1. Summary of the models discussed in the report

Model	Number of services/ adm.	Central versus local government responsibility		
		<i>Employment</i>	<i>Insurance</i>	<i>Social services</i>
1. Central government responsibility for welfare-to-work	3	Central	Central	Local
2. Local government responsibility for welfare-to-work	2	Local	Central	Local
3. Central government single agency model	1	Central	Central	Central
4. Municipal model	1	Local	Local	Local

The commission did not advocate giving local government responsibility for following up the government's welfare-to-work policy (Models 2 and 4). Model 3, which was closest to what the Storting had asked for, implied that the tasks of the Labour Market Administration, National Insurance Service and traditional social welfare offices would all be carried out by one agency. This model was not, however, recommended by the commission, since it was considered to create too much complexity and reduce the focus on employment, while potentially increasing the need for co-ordination.

The preferred model was Model 1, which had similarities with the model that the Storting had rejected in the first phase of the process. In our view this showed quite clearly that the commission was not controlled or steered by the government towards certain conclusions, but was free to make independent decisions. Model 1 recommended two specialised services at the central government level, one for employment and income, with responsibility for services and payments related to employment and/or reduced ability to work, and one administration for pensions, family payments and health reimbursements, labeled a pension service system. The commission also proposed that the local authorities should retain responsibility for the social services. The model also adhered fairly closely to the existing way of organising the three services involved.

The commission argued that establishing a central administration for employment, based on the National Public Employment Service and the employment-related parts of the National Insurance Service, would increase the likelihood of fulfilling one of the main goals of the reform. It also argued that a centralisation of this service would enhance cost-efficiency and increase professional competence. The main reason for proposing to split responsibility between two agencies was that this would be most cost-efficient. The report stated that the second central administration proposed – a pensions administration that was a down-sized version of the existing one – would further the goal of being more user-friendly. This entailed making procedures less ambiguous, improving central control and standardisation, and providing more equal treatment and better-quality services.

The report argued that a division into two types of administrations/services would dovetail with the two main aims and tasks of the employment and welfare administration. While the first type of task, connected to things like pensions and child-care support, is more rule-oriented, the second, related to employment, is more discretion-based and constrained by the resources and abilities of users. The culture related to these services is more solution- than rule-oriented. The report argued that the local authorities should retain responsibility for the social services. The main arguments for this were that this would facilitate co-ordination with other local services and that complexity would be likely to increase if the social services were merged with employment-related services; the disadvantage would be the lack of employment-orientation locally. The commission proposed that the new employment service should have a strong local presence and be located together with the social services, possible including the pension service. It did not, however, say much about how the services should be organised locally.

When the report was delivered, a new minister had just been appointed, a former director of the National Insurance Administration. He signaled that he would probably not follow up the proposal from the commission, since he was more interested in creating an administration that was oriented towards user-participation.

The bodies that commented on the report expressed different views on the organisational model. None of them supported a model where local government was assigned responsibility for all three services. The Association of Local and Regional Authorities and most of the local authorities supported Model 2. This model gave municipalities responsibility for following up the welfare-to-work policy. Most of the

other commenting bodies agreed that the current division of responsibility between the central and local authorities should remain unchanged. There were differences of opinion, however, about whether central responsibility should be given to one or two agencies.

When the report was submitted, the division of ministerial responsibility had just been reorganised. Whereas previously employment issues had been located in one ministry and insurance and social services in another, the new structure created a new Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (from 2005 Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion) to oversee both employment and social services. This removed much of the tension between the different ministers that had characterised the first phase of the process. By establishing the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in 2003 the government made organisational changes that supported a comprehensive reform policy. Merging political responsibility paved the way for a co-ordinated effort to implement the reform. The new minister was also made great efforts to engage in a dialogue with the Storting, thus making the Storting more receptive to a solution that was not its first priority.

The government proposal

As mentioned earlier, the government had two main arguments for carrying out a reform of the employment and welfare administration. First, too many people of working age were outside the labour force and had been receiving benefits for a long time. Second, too many users were encountering a divided administration that did not meet their need for co-ordinated assistance across agency boundaries. The new proposal from the government was based on the same general goals as the report of the commission. One of the major arguments for the merger was that it was an important precondition for a fully integrated one-stop shop service locally. Under the slogan «More people at work – fewer on benefits» the government strove to create a more user-friendly system and a more co-ordinated and efficient employment and welfare administration.

The government held a strong belief in reorganisation as the answer to the need for reform. The argument was that an organisational reform would not only mean changes in formal organisational structures designed to enhance co-operation and co-ordination and improve user-orientation, but would also more sensitive to political priorities, and should involve changes in organisational culture, competencies and working methods.

The government proposed a merger of the employment and pension/insurance services into one service headed by a new central agency (NAV) (St.prp. nr. 46 (2004–2005)). This proposal was a combination of Models 1 and 3 outlined in the commission report (see Figure 1). The social services were to remain a local government responsibility. It was now proposed to establish a new one-stop shop arrangement at the local level, bringing together the new merged service and the social services.

The government argued that employment and pensions had more in common than the report suggested. Users often needed to use both services and a merger would therefore be more user-friendly. The chosen solution was, however, also said to be an advantage for the employers. It was argued that the merger would reduce co-ordination

costs at the ministerial level, improve cost-efficiency through advantages of scale and also bring potential benefits for strategic planning. Budgeting, steering and the creation of result indicators were also stressed.

The government attached more importance than the Commission had done to establishing a front-line service that would be the users' gateway to all services in the employment and welfare administration. The government also stressed certain preconditions for an efficient local one-stop shop, mentioning both structural and cultural changes, even though local discretion and variety are generally a favoured option. Local agreements would be established based on a formal central agreement between the government and the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities. Local leadership-training and joint competence-enhancement programs were also mentioned.

Summing up, the government proposed two major organisational changes. First, it wished to establish a front-line service with an employment and welfare office in every municipality. Legally the front-line service would be based on a binding agreement between the central and local authorities laid down in local co-operation agreements. This partnership between central and local government was designed to provide co-ordinated services better adapted to users' needs and to replace the present system of three different offices in each municipality. A network of local offices would constitute a co-ordinated front-line service with responsibility for employment, sick leave, medical and occupational rehabilitation, disability pensions, financial social assistance, pensions and family benefits.

Second, central government responsibility would be concentrated in one agency: the employment and welfare service (NAV). The government proposed closing down the present Labor Market Administration and the National Insurance Service and establishing one new government agency that would co-operate closely with the individual local authorities.

The new system is a radical departure from the employment and welfare administration, but it also represents a complicated arrangement of central-local government co-operation and division of responsibility. The division of responsibility between central and local authorities has not changed in a fundamental way. Political responsibility for the national insurance service as well as for labour-market policy remains with central government, while financial social assistance remains a discretion-based, means-tested benefit under municipal management. Both the co-ordination between the three services at local level and the one-stop-shop idea, however, represent challenges for services and government levels that are used to territorial as well as cultural distance.

This government proposal received the support of the Storting, even though it did not include a full merger. The standing committee for social affairs emphasised the challenges of merging two services with different cultures, goals and steering measures and pointed out the need for careful planning and implementation. Several of the political parties said it was imperative that the new model(s) at the local level should produce better co-operation among the services, and they also stressed the user-friendliness and cost-efficiency aspects of the proposal. The Progressive Party, the far right-wing party, proposed Model 3, which envisaged central government control of the

merged services, including social services, but this proposal was not supported by any of the other parties.

As a consequence of the Storting's approval of the government proposal an interim organisation for the new employment and welfare organisation (NAV) was set up in 2005 and the new agency was formally established on 1 July 2006. Legislative amendments providing for a new employment and welfare administration were approved by the Storting in 2006 (St.prp. nr. 46 (2004–2005)). The plan is that the front-line service units will be in place throughout the country by 2010.

The main challenges will be, first, to establish a new, co-ordinated front-line service with user-oriented employment and welfare offices all over the country; second, to bring about constructive co-operation between the central and local authorities; and, third, to create an efficient merged central government agency based on established agencies with very different cultures, tasks and professions.

Analyzing the process, organizational challenges and potential effects

Explaining the process

How may a transformative approach help us to understand the decision-making process and above all the organisational thinking? To start with, in terms of the decision-making structure and the pattern of participants, the process has some peculiar features. Following the Storting's initial «no» to the proposal from the government and its demand for a merger of the three types of services, one would, on the basis of a hierarchical *instrumental perspective*, have expected the government to organize a rather closed and controlled evaluation process in order to ensure a result that complied with the Storting's demands. This was not the case, however. Instead, the government engaged in what looked like a complicated negotiation process, which was opened up through the use of a public commission with a wide mandate. Its only constraint was the Storting's demand for a more user-oriented service that took account of multi-agency users, as one of three major goals. The solution proposed by the commission, which was similar to the one that had been rejected by the Storting in the first round, was then modified by the government, reducing the administration from three services to two. This solution, which represented a concession to the Storting, could be seen as a compromise, and was eventually accepted by the Storting. This may well have been a tactical use of the commission, but it also entailed redefining goals in the course of the process, which was then reflected in a new ministerial structure and a new minister.

If the organisational thinking in the process is analysed from an instrumental perspective, the organisational model looks rather weak and shallow. The goals stated are general and rather vague, the tensions between them are largely ignored, specific problems are seldom discussed, and proposed solutions do not have a strong basis or analytical background. Normally, organisational thinking involves instrumental or rational features. Yet, the original solution sought by the Storting – a single merged service – while reflecting some post-NPM thinking about the advantages of horizontal

de-specialisation, was not particularly rational, given that there was no discussion of whether there was a real problem with multi-service users or of the possible disadvantages arising from the heterogeneity of users in a merged service.

The management model for the new employment and welfare organisation is based on NPM tools. Management-by-objective-and-results is a main principle for steering and control, and performance indicators and reporting are a main component of this system. It introduces the balanced score-card principle, focusing on multiple objectives and the relationship between tools and user outcomes. In addition, knowledge management and a formalised and generic quality-management system are applied, based on user surveys and quality assessments (see Læg Reid, Roness and Rubecksen 2006). Thus, the model is a hybrid of central NPM management tools and post-NPM whole-of-government features.

In defining multi-service users as a minor problem the public commission was acting instrumentally and it therefore proposed only minor structural adjustments. And while proposing specialisation first according to aim and then according to geography is consistent with the statement that there are two distinctive goals and tasks, it is not very consistent to argue that social services partly overlap with the two other services without proposing a restructuring. Here the commission was following basic political logic: for by giving priority to local co-ordination and local democracy it was probably anticipating that proposing a solution for the social services administration that took account of the needs of the central government would lead to political problems. The report also said that the one-stop shop should be based on employment needs, without really specifying why.

The government argued that employment and insurance had a common goal, and therefore proposed merging the two services, arguing that this would make them more effective. However, the whole solution was based on the premise that this would improve the situation for multi-service users – a premise that was not well founded. It argued for a one-stop shop with a divided structural solution, but it was not clear about whether bringing the two services together physically would modify this and create an integrated service.

The *cultural-institutional perspective* can be used to explain the decision-making structure in the process, at least partially. The open mandate for the committee, which did not follow up on the demands from the Storting, may signal that the government's primary intention was to attend itself to the long-term norms of determining the internal structure of the executive apparatus while giving the experts leeway.

The process may also be seen in terms of competing types of appropriateness among the actors (Christensen and Røvik 1999, March 1994). Like the first group of experts (path-dependency), the commission of experts saw few reasons for supporting real mergers in the structure. The Storting, without bothering to analyse the problem more closely, claimed that merging the three administration/services into a more holistic structure was the most appropriate solution, simply because it believed that this was the way to solve co-ordination problems. In addition, the government deemed it appropriate to focus chiefly on the multi-user problem, resulting in its proposal to merge employment and insurance, without daring to touch, for political reasons, local responsibility for the social services. All the main actors were concerned that cultural

traditions would hamper the desired the desired effects of the reform, and they hence stressed the need to develop a new common culture, both between the spheres of employment and insurance, in the newly merged employment and welfare administration, and also with regard to the local one-stop shops and collaboration with the locally based social services.

The *environmental perspective*, which embraces a complex combination of technical and institutional elements, may also be used to explain certain aspects of the process. The sectors involved have a large number of strong interest groups, and by establishing a reference group consisting of such actors it was possible to lend the process additional legitimacy. By the same token, forming a commission of experts as a response to the Storting's criticism of the initial proposal allowed the government to challenge the Storting's view that multi-agency users were the main problem and to use the facts delivered by the commission to make it look like an exaggeration and a myth. The view that merging the services would bring about major improvements may also be seen as a post-NPM counter-myth and deviates from the dominant NPM-myth of specialisation. The focus on user interests and efficiency also involves some typical NPM symbols, and hence can be classified more as rhetorical than rational. Indeed, if these goals are operationalised, it becomes obvious that they run counter to each other or at least that there is a tension between them.

The modified solution that the government returned to the Storting may also be seen as a myth, since the alleged advantages of a full merger also acquired a symbolic status and an overly specialised solution was thus ruled out. It is also interesting that the final solution was presented, probably intentionally, as one merged administration, when in fact it was two. This would seem to indicate that the media have also become caught up in symbolic values.

Summing up, the process can be seen as a combination of instrumental, cultural and environmental features as indicated in figure 2.

Figure 2. Features of the process that can be interpreted from the different perspectives constituting the transformative approach

<p><i>Instrumental perspective:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Multi-service users defined as minor problem *Consistency in aims and arguments *Local self-government as a priority
<p><i>Cultural perspective:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Open mandate for the commission *Decision by government *Different types of appropriateness among actors *Awareness of different cultural/professional traditions in the three services
<p><i>Environmental perspective:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Interest groups engaged * Expert commission with open mandate *Post-NPM myth *The symbolic status of a merger

Describing the challenges of co-ordination and specialisation

How can we describe the new NAV model using our theoretical framework of specialisation and co-ordination? One main challenge rises from the combination of two principles of specialisation: the specialisation of central government according to sector or function and the specialisation of local government according to territory. These two principles come together in the front-line units, and it is a big challenge to build a common professional platform, to clarify roles, responsibilities and authority, to construct a unified management executive model, to harmonise budgets, services and benefits, and to build a common culture and new competencies.

Another challenge is related to horizontal co-ordination on different levels. One aspect here is the horizontal intra-ministerial co-ordination between the employment and insurance administrations and other areas in the ministry; another is the inter-ministerial co-ordination between the employment and welfare administrations, on the one hand, and other related policy areas such as education and health on the other. There are also concerns about vertical co-ordination involving the instruments the ministry has to influence social services locally in the tension between functional and territorial specialisation. The advantage here is that all the relevant areas now come under the ministry, potentially furthering coordination; the disadvantage is that the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion is huge, and the political leadership may have

capacity problems. Another aspect is whether the different levels of the NAV agency will really manage to co-ordinate employment and insurance services as planned. A third aspect is local co-ordination with the social services inside the one-stop shops.

This complex structural design clearly creates a need for co-ordination, but there is also the challenge of balancing the three main goals or considerations of the reform – employment, user-friendliness and cost-efficiency – in the new structure. It is not easy to see how this can be done, partly because the goals are rather vague and the degree of success is difficult to measure, but also because they are potentially contradictory or attend to different groups. How easy is it, for example, to improve user-orientation and at the same time become more cost-efficient? How well do employment and insurance services fit together when it comes to improving their relationship with their users?

Employing more people is, of course, a goal that is affected by other factors such as international economic developments, the national structure of the labour market, industry policy, regional development, education, etc.. So what role does structure play in fulfilling this goal alongside all these other factors? One advantage of the new structure may be that a closer relationship with social services may mean people with social problems more easily establish a connection with the employment apparatus and find it easier to get a job. The same may apply to the connection of certain groups to the insurance programs. On the other hand, the increased complexity may create confusion in the newly modernised employment service, and may impede job-placement. In addition the group of users connected to the insurance service includes a lot of elderly people and therefore does not overlap much with the employment function. The same is the case for many social services users.

A key indicator of fulfillment of the goal of increased user-friendliness is how well the newly established local one-stop shops function. This is partly a structural challenge, because the newly merged employment and insurance services will have one set of formal structures, law, rules, tasks and personnel, while the locally based social services will have a completely different one. What are the control instruments and incentives furthering local collaboration between the two types of services? And what about the participation of users locally? What is the relative importance of a simplified procedure for applying for services and assistance vis-à-vis the actual results of these applications? In other words, are people more oriented towards process than results, or the other way around? Another aspect of local structural challenges, for example, is how well their IT systems fit together. The challenge here is to make what were previously three different systems compatible, and the NAV has expended a lot of resources to this end.

One challenge mentioned by many actors in this process is the cultural one. How easy is it to merge a judicial culture (insurance), designed to deal with individual cases, with a modernised employment culture, embracing a broader range of social science competencies and more complex problems, and with a local social service culture based on local knowledge and a client-oriented discretionary culture? As mentioned in the commission's report, path-dependency is strong in all three services and may prevent local collaboration in the one-stop shops from working smoothly. Therefore, both the government proposal and the Storting committee's report envisage the training of local leadership locally and the development of local professional competence and culture as part of a more systematic human resources management strategy.

The goal of increased cost-efficiency seems to have received less attention than the other two main goals. This probably reflects the Norwegian tradition of avoiding redundancies when major public reforms are implemented, a principle that was also adhered to in this reform. Rationalisation of human resources is an aspect of NPM ideology largely ignored in Norway. Thus, while economy of scale was mentioned during the process, there was little discussion of where resources could be saved and how these might be used alternatively.

The reform in many ways builds on post-NPM views of co-ordination and collaboration and also pays heed to the trend towards a reassertion of the centre, even though there is a major focus on local solutions. There seem to be two major aspects of co-ordination that are important challenges, and there is still some ambiguity about how they will be solved. The first one is vertical co-ordination, meaning how the central government should secure control over the new services and standardise them. This co-ordination could be based either on political control, indicating a traditional, centralised structure; or on production, suggesting more devolution-oriented solutions; or else on rights, making greater use of independent appeals bodies, for example. One aspect here is the relationship between the ministry and the central agency (NAV) for the merged employment and insurance services. The organisational solution apparently envisaged here is a more traditional ministry-agency relationship, where there is a balance between control and autonomy. A second aspect is the internal vertical co-ordination inside the NAV agency, and a third the inter-governmental or inter-level relationships between the central agency and the regional and local parts of the apparatus. A fourth is co-ordination with the local leadership.

Potential effects and implications of the new structure

Viewed in a historical perspective, the merger of the employment and insurance administrations in Norway is rather unique. Never before have two such large sectoral administrations been merged. In 1992 there was an attempt to merge the tax and customs administrations, whose tasks would appear to be more closely related than those of employment and insurance. However, the attempt failed, primarily because the tax administration was against it and got political support for its position (Haugen 2005). The director of the tax agency argued very strongly that the tax administration had such a special culture that it could not possibly be merged with another organisation (Grøndahl 2004). The current reform is even more complicated because it also involves social services based locally. Never before have central and local government co-operated in this way in the form of a one-stop-shop system at one geographical level.

The first question to be raised is whether this new administrative apparatus is likely to increase political control over the administrations and services involved or whether it will instead increase institutional and professional autonomy. The preconditions for more political control are certainly there. First, the sectoral ministry has overall responsibility for all the services involved, i.e. it has instruments at its disposal for potentially controlling the locally based social services, meaning that co-ordination is easier than if the services had been divided among several ministries. But the Ministry of

Labour and Social Inclusion is large and encompasses several other policy areas, like immigration, so there are concerns with capacity problems. Second, the services being merged will have different structures and cultures to cope with, something that does not point in the direction of increased institutional and professional autonomy. However, if the process of creating a homogeneous structural and cultural service is successful, this picture may change. Third, the two merging services are centrally based, while the social services are locally based, which would potentially give the central apparatus the upper hand, particularly if the NAV agency is closely controlled by the ministry. The final structure of the new apparatus has not yet been laid down in detail, so there is some leeway for a structure based on production units and with more emphasis on independent appeals bodies, which would potentially undermine political control; however, there are few indications that this will be the main solution.

The new reform model means that the central-local relationship is no longer simply a territorial one. Rather, the two levels of government now operate at the same geographical level and within the same office. For multi-level governance in Norway this is a totally new experience. This new arrangement will definitely solve some co-ordination problems, but it is also expected to create others. An independent political level, with its own political bodies, now manages one third of the office, while the other two thirds are managed by delegated central government power. One important stipulation of the reform is that whatever model or solution is eventually chosen for the organisation of the one-stop-shop locally, it must be situated in one locality and managed by one chief executive. This is new in Norwegian administration, and an important question is if and how it will effect the autonomy of local self government, both in this particular area and more generally.

Another main aspect of the reform as a post-NPM reorganisation is the effects of some of the main co-ordinative efforts made. Are they realistic and will they produce the desired results when it comes to fulfilling the major goals? As pointed out earlier, the organisational thinking behind the reforms is rather shallow and weak, often based on rather loose assumptions about the connection between the merger and relocation and the effects on services and users. One major question is whether the reorganisation is overly geared to coping with multi-service users. While these users are indeed likely to be better off with a co-ordinated structure, the outcome of the merger for the remaining 85% who normally use only one of the original services may actually be negative. For these users the merger may create more complexity and confusion and hence a poorer service is potentially there. Thus, the new administration is likely to have a highly differentiated internal structure or it may even engage in new reorganizations to spin off some units that do not naturally belong together. One can of course hope for «smart practice» and seamless internal collaboration, but there is obviously a concern that operations may not run as smoothly as that.

There are also some question-marks concerning the one-stop shops and the collaboration between the two merged services and the social services locally. Will the new collaboration be based on a common understanding about how to realise the main goals of the reforms, or will there be structural and cultural problems? One particular tension in the new structure that is not easy to solve is that the new merged employment and welfare administration, headed by the NAV agency, is likely to attend primarily to

national goals and values of standardisation, while the social services are naturally closer to the culture and concerns of the local administrative apparatus, which result in some divergence. Whether bringing the administrations together physically in local one-stop shops will have any effect on this is more of an open question. A study of the emerging tendency to establish one-stop shops or local service-collaboration units for several local services in Norway has revealed advantages for the users but also tensions between local professions and cultures and a wide variety of local organisational solutions (Mehus 2003).

Conclusion

There is a tension between WOG initiatives, such as the NAV reform in Norway, and performance-management systems (Pollitt 2003b). Performance management has encouraged individuals as well as organisations to meet their own performance targets, and there has been a tendency towards some fragmentation of organisational forms. In contrast, the NAV aims to promote co-operation, networks, and collaboration between organisations. Nevertheless, performance-management systems have been kept and developed further as a main steering technique. Unless cross-cutting targets get equal status as organisation-specific targets, this combination may run into a lot of problems.

WOG initiatives, such as the NAV reform approach, have a strong positive flavour and are generally seen as a good thing. But it is also important to stress that the «silo mentalities» that these reform initiatives are supposed to attack exist for good reasons (Page 2005). Well-defined vertical and horizontal organisational boundaries should not only be seen as a symptom of obsolescent thinking (Pollitt 2003b). A division of labour and specialisation are inevitable features of modern organisations, implying that WOG initiatives will be difficult to implement. Working horizontally is a very time- and resource-consuming activity. A critical Canadian study of horizontal management recommended that horizontal arrangements should be entered into only after careful thought and an estimate of the costs involved (Bakvis and Juillet 2004).

The NAV approach also raises other difficulties, such as unintended risks, ambitious agendas and uncontrolled consequences (Perry 6 et al. 2002). Accountability and risk management are central concerns. A key question is how one can have joint action, common standards and shared systems, on the one hand, and vertical accountability for individual agency performance on the other. Lines of accountability are not entirely clarified. The challenge is to achieve a better balance between vertical accountability to central government, horizontal accountability to local government and to agencies in other related policy areas, and responsiveness downwards to users and clients (Ryan and Walsh 2004).

Our empirical data indicate that there are contradictory forces pulling in different directions when it comes to adopting a WOG approach such as the NAV reform (see Peters 1998). On the one hand, central government has been pushed to decentralise decision-making. On the other hand, the centre has been encouraged to strengthen its capacity to co-ordinate policy development and implementation. Several competing strategies have been advocated and implemented to enhance new employment and

welfare administration, implying that the reform content is actually more fluid and contested than might be inferred from the use of this rather homogeneous term (Ling 2002).

One similar example is the *Centerlink* case in Australia, which was established as a one-stop, multi-purpose delivery agency to provide services primarily in the area of social security and unemployment. One important conclusion from the experience of the Australian reform is that structural reform of government organisations involving functional boundaries designed to improve performance can still leave public officials with the problem of how to bridge vertical separation and horizontal divisions (Halligan 2004). Centerlink is an organisation that has been associated with ambiguity and contradictions and with conflicts between organisational imperatives, representing a hybrid of different organisational models such as a departmental model, a customer-driven model, an entrepreneurial model and a political model. The new employment and welfare organisation in Norway may well encounter the same challenges.

It is also important to stress that high-level politics and changes in central government organisations are not necessarily the most important reform tool for promoting «whole-of-government» initiatives. NAV is to a great extent about lower-level politics and getting people on the ground in municipalities and local government organisations to work together. WOG needs a co-operative effort and cannot easily be imposed from the top down (Pollitt 2003b).

Attention must also be paid to the fact that building a WOG system is a long-term project that takes time to implement. Acquiring new skills, changing organisational culture, and building mutual trust relations all need patience. The role of a successful reform agent is to operate more as a gardener than as an engineer or an architect (see March and Olsen 1983), but this requires time and the Norwegian government's aim is to establish employment and welfare offices all over the country rather quickly.

Above all, it is important to underline that WOG initiatives such as NAV are far from being only a question of neutral administrative techniques. Accountability, legitimacy, power relations and trust in government organisations are fundamental political issues (Perry 6 2005). Even if governments set budgets, programs, and objectives that cross organisational boundaries, WOG activities may still be limited unless there are fundamental changes in accountability systems, dominant cultures, and structural arrangements.

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