

# Joined-up-government: Reform challenges, experiences and accountability relations

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# Joined-up-government:

## Reform challenges, experiences and accountability relations

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# Contents

PREFACE .....	3
ABSTRACT .....	4
SAMMENDRAG .....	4
INTRODUCTION .....	5
The Norwegian context .....	6
JOINED-UP-GOVERNMENT .....	8
The concept.....	8
NAV as a joined-up-government initiative – features and challenges.....	10
THREE CHALLENGES – MIXED EXPERIENCES .....	12
Challenge 1 – To get a merged central government agency to work.....	12
Challenge 2 – To establish constructive cooperation between the central and local authorities .....	13
Challenges 3 – To coordinate front-line service with user-oriented welfare offices .....	14
Challenges, accountability and reform dynamics.....	15
DISCUSSION .....	17
CONCLUSION .....	19
REFERENCES .....	20

## Preface

This paper is written as part of the NAV-evaluation, funded by the Research Council of Norway. It is also linked to the project «Reforming the Welfare State: Democracy, Accountability and Management, funded by the VAM program, the Research Council of Norway». The research leading to these results has also received funding from the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme under grant agreement No. 266887 (Project COCOPS), Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities», Work Package 5 – The governance of social cohesion: innovative coordination practices in public management. The paper was prepared for the 34th Annual EGPA Conference, the Study Group on «Governance of Public Sector Organizations», Bergen, 6–9 September 2012.

## Abstract

The merger of the employment and national insurance administrations and the collaboration between this new administration and local social services is one of the largest public-sector reforms ever to take place in Norway. The aims of the reform are to get passive beneficiaries back into work and activity and to make the administration more user-friendly, holistic and efficient. These aims are to be achieved by increasing the administration's capacity to address so called «wicked issues» by cutting across existing policy fields and territorial levels. The joined-up-government approach of this reform poses three main challenges: 1) to get a merged central government agency to work, 2) to establish constructive cooperation between the central and local authorities and 3) to coordinate front-line services with user-oriented employment and welfare offices. The paper discusses the experience gained from these three challenges five years into the reform process. The reform can hardly be proclaimed a success given its aims. The idea of increasing the capacity of government to cut across existing policy fields and handle trans boundary wicked issues is still struggling to be implemented. Cooperation between sectors seems to be easier to achieve than cooperation between levels. Experience has also revealed that the joined-up-government-approach of the reform tends to make accountability relations more blurred and ambiguous.

## Sammendrag

Sammenslåingen av Aetat og Rikstrygdeverket og partnerskapsavtalen mellom denne nye statlige etaten og de kommunale sosiale tjenestene er en av største forvaltningsreformene som er gjennomført i Norge. Målene med reformen var å få flere over fra trygd til arbeid og å gjøre den nye forvaltningen mer brukervennlig, helhetlig og effektiv. Disse målene skulle oppnås ved å styrke forvaltningens kapasitet til å håndtere de vanskelige problemene som går på tvers av eksisterende policy-områder og forvaltningsnivå. Den mer helhetlige tilnærmingen bak denne reformen står overfor tre hovedutfordringer: 1) å få den sammenslåtte etaten til å fungere, 2) å etablere et konstruktivt samarbeid mellom sentrale og kommunale myndigheter, 3) å koordinere førstelinje tjenester knyttet til sosialhjelp, arbeid og trygd. Dette notatet diskuterer erfaringer i forhold til disse tre utfordringene fem år inn i reformprosessen. Reformen kan så langt knapt erklæres som en suksess i forhold til målene med den. Ideen med økt kapasitet for å håndtere saker som går på tvers av policy-områder og forvaltningsnivåer strever fortsatt med å bli iverksatt. Samarbeid mellom politikkområder ser ut til å være enklere å oppnå enn samarbeid mellom forvaltningsnivåer. Erfaringer har også avdekket at den helhetlige reformtilnærmingen gjør ansvarsrelasjonene mindre skarpe og mer tvetydige.

## Introduction

The merger of the *employment and national insurance administrations* into a new employment and welfare administration called NAV is one of the largest reforms of public-sector coordination in recent Norwegian administrative history (Christensen, Fimreite and Læg Reid 2007). The reform also introduced formal collaboration between the merged central government administration and the local government *social services administration*. The NAV offices – situated in each of Norway's 429 municipalities – constitute a one-stop shop system where services from NAV are integrated with the local social services administration. This front-line office is organized 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.

The aims of the reform are to get more passive beneficiaries back into work and activity and to make the administration more user-friendly, holistic and efficient. These aims are to be achieved by increasing the capacity of the administration to address so called «wicked issues» that cut across existing policy fields and territorial levels. The idea is that the NAV reform will improve the welfare system through vertical and horizontal coordination in policymaking, implementation and service provision.

Many aspects of this reform have already been examined, including the reform process and the challenges of coordination (Christensen, Fimreite and Læg Reid 2007), the partnership arrangement (Fimreite and Læg Reid 2009, Askim, Fimreite, Mosley and Pedersen 2011), how to carry out joined-up-government reforms (Askim, Christensen, Fimreite and Læg Reid 2009), the reorganization of the reform (Christensen and Læg Reid, 2012c), the hybridity and complexity of the reform (Christensen and Læg Reid 2011a), accountability issues (Christensen and Læg Reid 2011b) and how to assess joined-up government reforms (Askim, Christensen, Fimreite and Læg Reid 2010). Many of these studies focus on the processes and content of the reform and do not pay much attention to the actual experience, effects and implications of the reform. This is also the case more generally in research on collaborations and partnerships in the social sector, which have concentrated heavily on process issues and paid less attention to analyzing outcomes, failures or successes (Dowling, Powell and Glendinning 2004).

It is now time to go beyond the process approach and ask whether joined-up government is delivering on its promises. This is the main focus in this paper, which discusses three challenges in the joined-up government initiative and examines how these are being handled five years after the reform was introduced. The three challenges were identified at the point when the NAV reform was about to be launched (Christensen, Fimreite and Læg Reid 2007) and are: 1) to get a merged central government agency based on established agencies with very different cultures, tasks and professions to work, 2) to establish constructive cooperation between the central and local authorities and 3) to create a new coordinated front-line service with user-oriented employment and welfare offices all over the country. Drawing on experiences

highlighted by an on-going evaluation program,<sup>2</sup> our main research question is to describe and analyse how the three challenges have been met in the first five years of the NAV reform. The focus when analysing these challenges will be whole-of-government approaches to reforms and in particular the implications for accountability relations such reforms imply.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss the context for implementation of the reform. Second, we describe the concept of joined-up government and the NAV reform as a joined-up government arrangement. Third, we address the three challenges the reform faces and discuss the findings in terms of the principles of joined-up-government and accountability relations. Finally we identify some implications.

## The Norwegian context

Norway is a unitary, parliamentary and multi-party state with a small population spread over a rather large geographical area. Since 2005 it has been ruled by a Red–Green majority coalition government. There is a strong democratic tradition in Norway and collectivist and egalitarian values are important (Christensen 2003). Consensus 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. The unemployment rate is one of the lowest in Europe (2.6 percent in March 2012) while the disability insurance rate is rather high (9.7 percent in May 2012). Three percent of people receiving disability insurance are under thirty years of age. The majority of disability insurance recipients are between fifty and seventy years of age (the latest retirement age in Norway is 70) (NAV 2012).

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

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<sup>2</sup> The evaluation program is organized under the National Research Council but financed by the Ministry of Employment. The funding is 5.2 million EUR over six years. The program was launched in 2007 and will be finished in 2013. The program is coordinated by the Uni Rokkan Centre in Bergen, but seven other institutions are also involved. The evaluation program has seven working packages (WPs) focusing on: 1) The Norwegian welfare model, governance system and NAV, 2) The local NAV office, 3) Implementation at local level, 4) The staff at local level – a new profession in NAV? 5) The back-to-work policy – more people in activity? 6) The clients' objective and subjective experiences with NAV and 7) Productivity – more welfare for money? WPs 1–4 focus on the process of implementing NAV and WPs, 5–7 have more of an effect focus. The WPs started at different times, 1–4 in 2007 and 5–7 in 2010/11. This paper will present results mainly from WP 1–4. The methods used in the WPs are: document analysis, in-depth interviews with involved actors at central, local and office level, data archives documenting agreements between central and local government, web surveys of CEOs and mayors in all Norwegian municipalities, observation studies, surveys of users and official statistics. There is no separate data collection for this particular paper. When we refer to «our data» it is data collected by the researchers in the evaluation program as such. For more information about the evaluation program see: [www.rokkan.uni.no/nav](http://www.rokkan.uni.no/nav)

public sector. In the Norwegian model welfare policies 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, primary schools, care of the elderly and primary 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, Flo, Tranvik and Aars 2004). The level of trust in public institutions in Norway is generally higher than in most other countries (Norris 1999).

In Norway administrative reforms at the central level have generally neglected cooperation 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, reflecting a strong historical trajectory (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 increased fragmentation and challenged vertical coordination. As a result of these movements, horizontal coordination between sectors has become more difficult at the central level. One consequence is that it is difficult to establish cross-ministerial cooperation 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 municipalities sectors have formally been merged and specialization principles other than sectorial have become more important. Local horizontal coordination has become easier, but at the same time the sector-based relationship between the central and local levels has suffered (Tranvik and Fimreite 2006). When the sectorial principle ceases to be the main mechanism at the lowest level, coordination between levels becomes a challenge.

The NAV reform proposed to meet this challenge by formally integrating services that are both central government (employment and national insurance administration) and local government (social services) responsibilities. The multi-level aspect is further emphasized by the fact that different government levels have to coordinate tasks at the same territorial level in the «one-stop-shop» arrangements in municipalities (Askim, Fimreite, Moseley and Pedersen 2011). These reform features can be said to correspond with joined-up-government aspects. We will therefore discuss this concept further and relate the NAV reform more directly to such a discussion.

## Joined-up-government

### The concept

Traditionally public sector organizations have been concerned with achieving their own specific objectives, reflecting funding and responsibilities which they can directly control. This can result in agencies adopting an overly narrow, 'silo' approach which does not consider the trans boundary challenges that cut across traditional responsibilities for such difficult issues as long-term unemployment and social deprivation (Pollitt 2003). Attempts to coordinate government policy-making and service delivery across organizational boundaries are not a new phenomenon (Ling 2002, Kavanagh and Richards 2001). The «siloization» or «pillarization» of the public sector seems to have increased in the NPM era, however (Gregory 2006, Pollitt 2003). The principle of «single-purpose organizations,» with many specialized and non-overlapping roles and functions, has produced fragmentation, self-centred authorities and a lack of cooperation and coordination, hence hampering effectiveness and efficiency (Boston and Eicbaum 2005: 21).

An answer to this is what in the literature is called a *joined-up-government-approach*. The joined-up-government 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 coordination (Ling 2002). Joined-up-government is an elusive term that has been used as a label for a variety of overlapping strategies. Pollitt (2003:35) has adopted a broad definition of joined-up-government as the aspiration to achieve horizontally and vertically coordinated thinking and action. It overlaps to a great extent with the «Whole-of-Government»-approach used in Australia, reflecting new labels for the doctrine of coordination of public administration (Christensen and Læg Reid 2007). Some authors also call joined-up-government a post-NPM-initiative (Christensen and Læg Reid (2010, 2012a). Joined-up-government is defined by the National Audit Office as «bringing together a number of public, private and voluntary sector bodies to work across organizational boundaries towards a common goal» (NAO 2001:1). In this paper we look at joined-up government mainly by focusing on cooperation between government agencies rather than using the broader meaning of joined-up governance, which also includes deciding policy or service delivery issues with civil society (Boston and Gill 2011).

The main motives for joining up are a) to get a broader view, so that ministries, agencies and local service centres make a better contribution to cross-cutting programs for client groups; b) to reduce conflicts between different policies and tackle intractable social issues by promoting programs that are better interconnected and mutually supportive; c) to create seamless services, improving service delivery through 'one-stop shops', call centres and accessible websites; d) to promote innovation by bringing together people with different backgrounds, professions and experiences; and e) to make better use of resources and improve cost-effectiveness by removing overlaps and realizing economies of scale (Pollitt 2003, GAO 2001).

Sue Richards (2001) distinguishes between three types of joining up. First *intractable or «wicked» policy problems* in which both the problem and the solution have a situational character. Such problems cut across administrative levels as well as agency boundaries and are deeply rooted in the cultural and economic structures of society (Hodges 2012). The issues of social exclusion are focused and no one knows how to solve these problems in a general way, but often a decentralized governance approach is what is needed. Second, *tame problems* situated on the boundaries between different organizations, in which solutions are known or where it is possible to find evidence-based answers. These problems are client-specific rather than situational. For such problems a top-down strategy would be more applicable, requiring partnerships that operate across silo structures. Third *seamless service* in which recent advancements in ICT technology permit better service access and delivery. Call centre and internet services are key structures and the governance system can be rather centralized. While the first two types focus on outcome-based performance, the last is more output related.

The implication of this differentiated approach to joining up is that it represents broad umbrella concepts that address different sets of problems requiring different approaches to solve them (Richards 2001). It can be said that the NAV reform intends to address all these three types of joining up, implying a need for both centralized and decentralized approaches and specialization by geography, by clients, by process and by tasks or purpose (Gulick 1937).

Two issues are particularly relevant when discussing joined-up-government from an organizational design perspective – the *intensity* and *scope* of working together (Boston and Gill 2011). The scope of joined-up-government can be analysed along several dimensions. One can distinguish between temporary and permanent arrangements, between joined-up-government policy-making and joined-up-government implementation and between horizontal linkages and vertical linkages; moreover, the targets for joined-up-government initiatives can be a group, a locality or a policy sector (Pollitt 2003). Joined-up-government 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. In our case we examine a version of joined-up-government with a rather broad scope: The arrangements are permanent, they address both policy making and service delivery, they have both a vertical and a horizontal reach and they cover all levels of government.

Regarding intensity, joined-up-government can take many forms such as realigning organizational boundaries by merging two or more organizations, creating formal partnerships governed by contracts or framework agreements or engaging in informal partnerships that work on the basis of consultation or unwritten mutual agreement (NAO 2001). In our case we mainly focus on different public sector organizations that have been brought together by mergers and formal partnerships. Boston and Gill (2011) distinguish between the following forms of inter-governmental integration along a formal/high intensity-informal/low intensity dimension: Collaboration (shared responsibilities), coordination (shared work), cooperation (shared resources), communication (shared information) and coexistence (self-reliance). Normally higher intensity implies more shared accountability relations, which pose more complicated and

ambiguous accountability challenges (Boston and Gill 2011). In our case we address high intensity formal collaboration.

## NAV as a joined-up-government initiative – features and challenges

Some elements of the NAV reform definitely resemble some features of NPM. This applies particularly to the performance management system, the focus on users and on efficiency in provision of services. The reform is, however, even more closely related to post-NPM features (Christensen and Lægveid 2007). The reform's strong emphasis on integrating service administrations from different administrative sectors and territorial levels makes it easy to classify it as an attempt to introduce a joined-up-government approach to the Norwegian welfare system.

First, a front-line service with an employment and welfare office was established in every municipality. Legally the front-line service is based on a binding agreement between the central and local authorities laid down in local cooperation agreements. Although it is not referred to as such in the act regulating the NAV reform, this collaboration is described as and also now called a *partnership*. The partnership between central and local government was designed to provide coordinated services better adapted to users' needs and to replace the former system of three different offices at local level. A network of local offices constitute a coordinated front-line service with responsibility for employment, sick leave, medical and occupational rehabilitation, disability pensions, financial social assistance, pensions and family benefits. The main coordination mechanism between levels and sectors here is the network, but it is aided by co-location and formalization.

Second, central government responsibility is concentrated in one ministry and one agency: the employment and welfare service (NAV). The former Labour Market Administration and the National Insurance Service were abolished and a new government agency was established whose regional branches co-operate closely with the individual local authorities. The main coordination mechanism is structural integration.

A third (and additional) organizational change was introduced in 2008 when the regional and local levels were reorganized. Six pension units and thirty-seven administrative units were established at regional level. The purpose of these units is to handle standardized services and also services provided to citizens as individual rights. The NAV reform started as a structural integration process in 2005, involving merging and partnership, but since the 2008 reorganization a more hybrid profile has emerged (Christensen and Lægveid 2012b). The process – from applications, through decisions to follow clients up – is now more specialized across levels, but the new system also exhibits some post-NPM features that take the form of more structural integration, gathering more resources and staff at the regional level.

This new welfare administration system is a radical departure from the original employment and welfare administration (Christensen et al. 2007, Christensen 2008). It represents a complicated organizational arrangement and division of responsibility between central and local authorities. 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. However, the coordination between the three services at local level and the one-stop-shop idea represent challenges for services and government levels that are used to maintain a certain degree of territorial as well as cultural distance.

Joined-up-government initiatives, such as the NAV reform approach, have a strong positive symbolic flavour and are generally seen as a good thing. But it is also important to point out that the «silo mentalities» these reform initiatives are supposed to bridge, exist for good reasons (Page 2005). Well-defined vertical and horizontal organizational boundaries should not only be seen as a symptom of obsolescent thinking (Pollitt 2003). Division of labour and specialization are inevitable features of modern organizations, implying that coordinative initiatives will be difficult to implement. Working horizontally is a very time- and resource-consuming activity.

The reform approach in NAV also raises other difficulties connected to ambitious agendas and uncontrolled consequences (6 et al. 2002). There is a tension between joined-up-government initiatives and performance-management systems (Pollitt 2003b). Performance management has encouraged individuals as well as organizations to meet their own performance targets, and there has been a tendency towards some fragmentation of organizational forms. In contrast, the NAV aims to promote co-operation, networks, cross-boundary targets and collaboration between organizations.

The three challenges we identified in 2007 are all related to the above-mentioned considerations (Christensen et al. 2007). As the reform has been implemented, all three challenges have turned out to have implications for accountability issues, and this is a central concern of the joined-up-government initiative that we will pursue further in this paper. 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 (Lægneid 2013). 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, like health, and responsiveness downwards to users and clients (Ryan and Walsh 2004). Different accountability mechanisms are activated to handle the accountability to whom question, such as political accountability (government/Parliament or political/administrative leadership), administrative/managerial accountability (internal control or external scrutiny body), professional accountability (professional norms) and social accountability (government/user or general public) (Bovens 2007, Christensen and Lægneid 2011a).

In the following section we will discuss how the three challenges have been handled and also how they are related to the important accountability relations elaborated above.

## Three challenges – mixed experiences

### Challenge 1 – To get a merged central government agency to work

Merging the two original central agencies into one huge agency *has* been challenging for NAV (Christensen 2008). This challenge is related to costs, cultural features and collaboration. First, concerning costs, there is on the one hand obvious potential for economies-of-scale in the merger. However, the reform itself cost a huge amount of money and all employees were guaranteed that they would keep their jobs, so this part of the efficiency equation has obviously been problematic.

Second, two entities with long and separate histories and different (and also strong and distinctive) organizational cultures have been merged. After five years there are clear indications that this integration operation has been relatively successful and also fairly harmonious at the central level. Few severe conflicts have been observed (Christensen 2008). While there have been few conflicts between the directors in the new agency and the political and administrative leaders in the Ministry of Labour, there have been some minor disagreements about how detailed the steering from the ministry should be. Whether this is related to the reform or to more permanent features in the relationship between ministries and agencies is not easy to conclude. At the operative level, there have been a number of discussions and also disagreements particularly in the agency. These discussions have addressed additional, in some cases controversial changes in the organizational structure that have taken place during the reform process, such as the integration of a separate delivery unit into the directorate (Simlenes 2011). Another conflict was related to whether the new administrative units at the regional level should be in the line organization (which was what eventually happened) or whether they should belong to a central unit for special administrative units, like the new regional pension units (Christensen 2011).

Third, actors at the central level, in the new NAV agency and in the Ministry of Labour whom we interviewed in the initial phase of the reform expressed a strong belief in the idea behind the reform. They were also supportive of the idea that public-sector reforms, particularly those in the public *welfare* sector, can be advanced by changing the organizational structure (Christensen 2008). Respondents at this level continued to be optimistic about organizational changes as a reform tool when they were re-interviewed in 2010.

The reorganization of the reform in 2008 also had relevance for making the merged central agency work. One of the basic ideas behind the reorganization was to be more efficient, increase the quality of casework and improve the rights of the clients by creating larger units at the regional level. Our respondents at central government level seem to support the view that this is mainly what has happened (Christensen 2011). It is a more open question whether this reorganization has benefited the local welfare offices.

## Challenge 2 – To establish constructive cooperation between the central and local authorities

Actors at the central level are concerned not so much about what is going on at the central level as about the relationship between the central and local levels and also about what *really* (as they themselves express it) takes place in the local NAV offices. For this reason they advocate more standardization and less variation between local NAV offices (Fimreite 2011). This implies that they want local government to play the role of implementer of policies decided at the central level in the partnership between central and local government. Local *self*-government was not mentioned at all when central actors reflected on the partnership between central and local government in NAV in our in-depth interviews (Fimreite 2008). In other words, they see the partnership as one-sided.

Since the partnership between central and local government was designed in the NAV, local government is free to include services and tasks other than the compulsory social services in the local office. The majority of municipalities (94 percent) do so. Which services or tasks are added varies from municipality to municipality, however (Aars 2011). The freedom to organize the local office to fit local needs and challenges also includes the right to decide whether the local office should be headed by a unitary manager taking care of both central and local government services or whether there should be a manager for each side. 93 percent of the municipalities have chosen a unitary local manager, while divided leadership is used in some of the big cities. The result of this freedom is that at the local level the NAV is a different organization in different municipalities. This is part of the reason why actors at the central level accentuate the need for more standardization and less variation when they assess what is taking place locally (Fimreite 2011).

Few conflicts between the central and local levels were reported in the process of establishing local NAV offices or during their first operational phase. Actors at the local level, however, also regard the relationship between the central and local levels as an important challenge for the NAV reform (Fimreite 2011). The role of local government in the NAV partnership is not seen primarily as local *self* government. A web survey of political and administrative leaders in Norwegian municipalities in 2011 revealed that NAV is regarded by local leaders as an administrative task. Our data show that there has been less attention from the local council and from individual local politicians since the agreement was signed and the local offices began operating (Aars 2011). Three out of five respondents in the survey also said that *their* local NAV-office – their particular partnership with central government – was a success, some even classified it as a great success. They also claimed that local NAV offices collaborate well with other local government services and tasks that are not included in the partnership (Aars 2011).

When the partnership was assessed in more abstract terms as a way of organizing the relationship between central and local government, it was, however, considered problematic. One reason for this may be that more than 70 percent of the local leaders in the survey believe that the central level has the superior role in the partnership. Local actors interpret this as meaning that their role in the partnership is that of an underdog.

The way the local NAV office is organized implies that there is a central–local relationship, not only between levels, but also inside each office. The evaluation program reveals that this integration process has been gradual. There has likewise been a step-by-step integration between central government services and local government services at office level. The evaluation program shows, however, that the partners are now moving towards mutual dependence and a growing flexibility at both levels when it comes to providing the other level's services (Alm Andreassen and Fossetøl 2009, 2011). At the same time as this integration took place, there was also a recentralization process related to the reorganization of the reform in 2008 and the establishment of new specialized regional units to improve standardization, quality, efficiency and rights (Christensen 2011, Christensen and Lægred 2011). Now that these administrative units have been operating for a few years, only one out of four officers at local level say they have more time to take care of users now than they did before the units were introduced (Alm Andreassen 2011).

### Challenges 3 – To coordinate front-line service with user-oriented welfare offices

The managers at local NAV offices with whom we conducted in-depth interviews say they have not had enough time to develop the internal organization of the local office during the implementation process. Their priority has been the relationship with the central level in the NAV. They have worked hard to meet the goals and objectives that have arisen as part of the central level efforts to steer and control downwards in NAV. As the local managers see it, this has been rather unfortunate for the users of the local NAV offices, for, as they themselves admit, there has not been enough focus from their side on the relationship between the local NAV organization and users (Alm Andreassen and Fossetøl 2011). Five years into the process the managers say more attention has to be given to the relationship between the NAV organization and the users rather than just to the internal relationships in the NAV. Local managers say openly in interviews that they have had to choose between implementing the aims of the reform and operating the local organization (Klemsdal 2011). Now they say it is time to focus more broadly on the aims of the reform, including at office level. Problems related to integration of ICT systems can have aggravated this situation. The reform was launched more or less without any joint ICT systems. In in-depth-interviews actors at local level reveal that they have had to struggle to cope with four or five different old ICT systems for their services (Røiseland and Vabo 2012:141–145). The pension reform that happened at the same time as the reorganization of the reform in 2008, however, brought with it a new IT system, which improved services in this newly specialized part of the reform but did not solve the overall IT problems (Førde 2010).

Integration at office level was not just meant to take place through changes in organizational structure. The professional workers from each coordinated administration were also important 'elements' in the integration. The original idea was that *all* staff members (officers at the employment and insurance service administrations and social workers in the social services) should be able to handle all tasks and provide every service that was assigned to the office. Very early in the implementation process it

was revealed that it was challenging to establish this sort of generalist competence among the staff at office level (Helgøy, Kildal and Nilssen 2011). Interviews conducted in 2011 showed that re-specialization and in some places even new specialization was taking place (Helgøy, Kildal and Nilssen 2011). The re-specialization is based on the old demarcations between the original services included in the NAV. The new specialization follows different principles of specialization to those of group or purpose. Some offices have established family teams, for instance, while in others we find youth teams, each with dedicated staff members. One possible reason why the generalist model has not been an immediate success is that the in-house-training of staff that the local NAVs used to rely on so heavily has not always been sufficient. Local staff members are, however, still quite positive about the ideas behind the reform, although the percentage which is supportive declined from 80 in 2008 to under 60 in 2011 (Alm Andreassen 2011). Reform fatigue and in some cases disappointment with what has been achieved so far have been offered as explanations for this decline.

User satisfaction with NAV shows a downward tendency in the period from 2007 to 2010, but internal user surveys have since then shown a slight increase again (Hansen 2009, Hansen 2011). How this is related to the challenges in the focus on internal organizational development and problems in the collaborative arrangements discussed above is not easy to judge. In 2009 NAV was one of Norway's less trusted public services (NSD 2010) and *the* public service with less satisfied users (DIFI-report 2010b). The NAV administration does not have a particularly good reputation either (DIFI-report 2010a).

An interesting observation in the evaluation program is that user satisfaction with the services is positively correlated with the number of services included in the local office (Christensen, Hansen & Aars 2011). In-depth-interviews with long-term NAV-users (on sick leave and unemployed) reveal, however, that they have experienced uncoordinated processing, unavailable officers and arbitrary use of measures, where it is random whether work/activity or some sort of disability social security is chosen as the final goal of their contact with NAV. Users claim that they have to act as their own coordinator in the NAV system (Lundberg 2011). In 2010 and 2011 NAV was the Norwegian public service institution against which the most official complaints were lodged. Nearly 20 percent of all complaints submitted to the Parliamentary Ombudsman were against the NAV (Parliamentary Ombudsman's annual report 2010:27, 2011).<sup>3</sup>

## Challenges, accountability and reform dynamics

In this paper we have described the NAV reform as a joined-up-government effort in the Norwegian welfare system. We have discussed the three challenges identified in 2007 as arising from the complicated arrangement of cross-sectorial coordination and central–local government collaboration (Christensen, Fimreite and Læg Reid 2007) and

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<sup>3</sup> Whether this is high, low or reasonable is not easy to have any qualified opinion about. Given that NAV is using more than one third of the budget of the state per year 20 % can be said to be low, but given that a high share of the money NAV uses are connected to pensions and individual rights based on more or less automatic criteria 20 % can be regarded as rather high. Only a more detailed project taking into consideration different aspects of the task portfolio of NAV and which part of this portfolio the claims mainly are connected to, can give sufficient answers here.

presented empirical data about how they have been coped with. This has revealed that horizontal coordination – both centrally and locally – seems to be more successful than the vertical coordination between levels in the complicated organizational arrangement which constitutes the NAV. Given this, can this joined-up-initiative be classified as a success or as a failure? One way to answer this question is to look at something else revealed by our data – namely, that the lines of accountability in the fields included also have been challenged. We will discuss these further below.

The first challenge – to get the merged central agency to work properly – did not change the political accountability relations between the ministry and the NAV agency, but in practice the NAV agency improved its status, because it is large and complex and has a lot of resources compared to the ministry (Christensen 2011). This tends to pose challenges for the ministry concerning insight and information. More grey zones have also emerged in political-administrative relations. The agency complains about a lack of clear priorities and stable objectives from the ministry, which has been seen as unpredictable and practicing hands-on management with respect to politically salient issues. The increasing influence of the merged NAV agency also has implications for the relationship between the Parliament and the government, making the political leadership rely on the leadership of the agency for more than it could deliver. The professional accountability relationship has also been affected by the merger into a new agency, albeit more for some employees than others. This is somewhat problematic, because the process of developing a new common cultural identity is slow and vital for efficiency.

The reorganization of the reform in 2008 primarily addressed administrative accountability, i.e. the relationship between the central leadership and the lower levels in the welfare administration. Through vertical structural integration – the establishment of large pension and administrative units on the regional level – the central level was strengthened overall, an effect also attributable to its rather tight regime of performance indicators directed towards the regional level (Breivik 2010).

The second challenge, connected to the relationship between levels, involves the political accountability principle of local self-government via the mandatory partnership arrangements. The NAV reform represents an agency strategy focusing on partnership structures and trans-organizational elements. Such multi-agency arrangements represent shared responsibilities and organizational complexity (Byrkjeflot, Christensen and Lægreid 2012). The partnership model was supposed to solve the tension between ministerial accountability and local self-government. So the main focus was on political accountability and how to live with simultaneous accountability to local politicians in the municipalities and to politicians at the central government level. In this respect the partnership model turned out to be difficult to practice, since it tended to make accountability relations more ambiguous. In practice the central government had a strong position in the relationship and it was difficult to fulfil the idea of equal partners. Political accountability through local self-government thus came under pressure. The partnership model is therefore a quasi-solution and it is too early to say whether the way that it fulfils the aims of the reform is an innovation or not (Fimreite 2011). It does, however, have attractive elements for the local authorities, because it involves receiving additional central resources to solve local problems.

Administrative or managerial accountability was in the reform handled by allocating resources to control and bureaucratization of control systems. The management-by-objectives-and-results system became more sophisticated as part of a more complex control system (Breivik 2010). There are, however, problems of goal focus, quality and responsibility. The MBOR system was not applied to the municipal part of the NAV system owing to the principle of local self-government (Breivik 2010). This is however not the same that there is none MBO in the local government part of the NAV office. Many places there are, but the goals and objectives are than set by the local, not the central, government level.

The third challenge – to coordinate front-line service with user-oriented welfare offices – affects accountability relations first and foremost through the merging of three professional communities into local one-stop shops and the challenge this represents to their original professional identity; hence there has been some pressure to develop the career profile of a new NAV professional. This has taken time and been difficult. With respect to social accountability it is an improvement, especially regarding multi-service users and clients, but the effects for one-service users are more ambiguous. Generally there is more focus on client needs, but challenges in handling these have been reflected in an increase in complaints and dissatisfaction. The reorganization of the reform in 2008 has tended to enhance legal accountability by focusing more on the rule of law, impartiality and equal treatment. The centralization to the regional level and re-specialization have tended to increase knowledge of clients' rights, improved the quality of information and brought about more equal case handling.

## Discussion

Our presentation allows us to conclude that the main challenge in NAV has been and still is connected to collaboration between levels rather than between sectors. At both the central and the local levels the involved sectors are starting to cooperate more closely even though this has taken time. Our findings about collaboration in the NAV are therefore in line with results presented by Davis (2009) regarding local strategic partnerships in the UK. Here he reveals a strong partnership ethos sustaining a consensus over abstract goals and legitimizing the avoidance of political value conflicts. Thus consensus about partnership ethos caused the displacement of value conflicts which in turn enhanced silo practices and fragmented governance. The implication of this is that joined-up-government might remain intangible unless partners can also debate and resolve value conflicts (Hoggett 2006). Our findings also support findings by Martin (2010:347) that local government partners tend to continue to operate as delivery agents for national government, tied into its priorities through an elaborate system of centrally driven performance targets. (This might especially be the case if the formation of the partnership is the result of central government policy (Hodges 2012).

Regarding accountability relations one important finding so far seems to be that *tasks matter*, in different ways. First, welfare administration is a highly salient area of policy and this tends to put political accountability up front. There seem to be clear limitations on how far one can go in constraining political accountability in such politicized areas

(Byrkjeflot, Christensen and Læg Reid 2012). The political dynamics also tend to produce unstable trade-offs between accountability mechanisms. The reform shows that the accountability is not only shared and multidimensional, but also dynamic and hybrid.

Second, accountability also varies from one service to another, and the acceptance of local variation in service provision is different in different areas (Fimreite 2011, Bogdanor 2010). Insurance and pensions are more like machine bureaucracies and have a stronger focus on legal accountability than social security or labour issues that allow for more local variation and discretion. Thus the spatial dimension and geographically based services are more relevant for some tasks than for others, and this has implications for the blending of different principles of specialization and accountability mechanisms. While hierarchical accountability might be better aligned with routine tasks, professional accountability might be more suitable for non-routine tasks (Romzek 2000).

This reform has revealed that traditional mandatory, hierarchically oriented political accountability needs to be supplemented by more voluntary horizontal accountability relations (Bovens 2007, Schillemans 2008), in our case related to the local partnership, in order to cover cross-cutting issues and activities transcending organizational borders. The problem with the hierarchical approach to political, administrative and managerial accountability is that it assumes a clear division between politics and administration. In practice, however, much of the work of the public administration is political and this tends to blur the politics/administration divide and make administrative and managerial accountability more difficult and demanding. The problem of many eyes or the accountability to whom question are crucial, implying that traditional vertical political accountability mechanisms have been supplemented with administrative/managerial accountability, legal accountability, professional accountability and social accountability. The accountability relationships are becoming increasingly complex and hybrid. One main challenge is to safeguard public accountability in a situation in which the government is increasingly acquiring a horizontal and multi-level character (Michels and Meijer 2008).

The different types of joined-up government produce different accountability challenges (Richards 2001). Intractable problems will need accountability mechanisms that empower local people to be accountable for their actions. 'Tame problems' require accountability mechanisms that provide legitimacy for cross-boundary activities to achieve outcomes. Seamless services will challenge accountability relations on the interface between the new areas of seamless services and other aspects of public service. It is important to integrate accountability arrangements into the joined-up arrangements and to handle accountability as part of the answer to the question of public support for collective welfare services and not part of the problem.

Joined-up-government normally implies diffused or shared accountability relations among a number of actors. This is especially the case when the tasks or outputs are difficult to separate and are highly interdependent (Boston and Gill 2011). The problem with this shared accountability is that it tends to become fuzzy. Instead of choosing between different accountability mechanisms we have to treat them as supplementary and complementary in a mixed political order that combines and blends different modes of governance (Olsen 2007). We have revealed a multiple accountability regime in which

the different accountability mechanisms do not substitute for each other (Schillemans 2008). A new accountability regime with more complex, dynamic and layered accountability forms is emerging (cf. Streeck and Thelen 2005). A key challenge is how to handle hybrid accountability relations embedded in partly competing institutional logic. Multiple accountabilities may be appropriate solutions for an increasingly pluralistic governance system. Accountability is about managing diverse and partly conflicting expectations (Romzek and Dubnick 1987, Willems and Van Dooren 2011).

In a joined-up government approach one has to go beyond the traditional forms of political accountability to close the ‘accountability gap’ that has emerged in the aftermath of NPM reforms (Flinders 2012). Democratic accountability has to be rethought in ways that resonate with the new reality of modern governance systems. Simply to reinstall conventional hierarchical principal-agent accountability relations is problematic in the current more fluid state. The hierarchical principal-agent approach of delegation and vertical channels of accountability needs to be supplemented with analyses of how multiple and hybrid accountability relations interact and change over time (Goetz and Jenkins 2001).

## Conclusion

As things currently stand, five to six years after the decision was taken to implement the reform, NAV can hardly be proclaimed as an unqualified success. The idea behind the reform – to increase the capacity of government to cut across existing policy fields and in that way handle ‘wicked issues’ in the various welfare fields – is still struggling to be implemented. The main challenge seems to be to establish constructive cooperation between central and local authorities, related to a structural solution that is complex and hybrid. There are also still challenges connected to creating a coordinated front-line service with user-oriented employment and welfare offices – challenges that relate to a tension between roles and tasks, but also to professional competence and identity. The challenge of establishing a merged central government agency has, however, been more successfully handled.

As accountability relations have become more blurred and ambiguous, it seems hard to live up to the intentions and ambitions in the joined-up-government approach. Political accountability is formally the same, but the central agency has also strengthened its position in many ways. Administrative accountability, through performance management has become more complex and challenging. Legal accountability is increasing first and foremost through standardization and formalization via the administrative units at regional level. Professional accountability still bears the tensions resulting from three formerly separate services with strong path-dependency struggling to integrate. Social accountability becomes challenging when user satisfaction lags behind expectations. A multi-dimensional accountability approach is needed to handle accountability in a pluralistic political-administrative system (Lægreid, forthcoming), but so far this has not evolved in the NAV reform. And that might be the greatest challenge for the reform in the years to come.

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