

Accountability Relations in Unsettled Situations: Administrative Reforms and Crises

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Working paper
3-2015

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ISSN 1503-0946

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Accountability Relations in Unsettled Situations:

Administrative Reforms and Crises

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JULY 2015

Working paper 3 – 2015

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Abstract

This paper examines what characterizes accountability relationships in the unsettled situations that arise during reforms or crisis management. We look at how accountability is handled in circumstances that go beyond «business as usual». By way of illustration we take the post-2005 reforms of the Norwegian welfare administration and the crisis management following the terrorist attack in 2011. In theoretical terms we argue that we have to go beyond a principal-agent approach and must instead apply a broad institutional perspective to understand how accountability plays out in such situations. Our main findings are that accountability relations in unsettled situations are multiple because the challenges they face are ambiguous, complex, dynamic and conflicting.

Preface:

This is a revised version of a paper to be presented at an international symposium on accountability study and design: Moving to the next level, the 2015 ASPA Annual Meeting, Chicago March 6 2015. This paper was presented at workshop on «Accountability and governance in education and elsewhere», Paris may 12–13 2015. It is linked up to the project «Reforming the welfare state: Democracy, accountability and management», funded by the Norwegian Research Council (the VAM program) and the GOVCAP project (Organizing for internal security and crisis management. Building governance capacity and legitimacy), funded by SAMRISK II program, the Norwegian Research Council.

Introduction

Accountability is often studied in stable situations where relationships between actors are rather clearly defined. In this article, however, we will examine multiple accountability relations in ambiguous and unsettled situations (Olsen, 2013). In theoretical terms we will argue for the need to go beyond instrumental perspectives in general or principal-agent models more specifically and also adopt an institutional approach to understand how accountability plays out under such conditions. Rational top-down approaches have to be supplemented by approaches that take account of broader socio-cultural processes, path-dependencies, symbols and contextual constraints. Conceptually we follow the Utrecht school of accountability with its focus on multiple accountability types (Bovens, 2007). We ask who is accountable for what, to whom, when and why.

Empirically we will address two different types of unsettled situations: administrative reform and crisis management, both of which typically handle «wicked issues» characterized by complexity, uncertainty, ambiguity and transboundary challenges. Wicked issues potentially require a holistic approach that goes beyond conventional linear vertical relationships and one that has the capacity to work across organizational boundaries (Clarke & Stuart, 1997). This implies a new style of accountability. We will analyze the ambiguous relationship between reform and accountability as indicated by Dubnick's (2011) reformist paradox – namely, that reform may undermine rather than improve accountability relationships – and also look at how dealing with crises raises questions such as the role of different forums in handling post-crisis accountability, the strategies used by different actors and the outcomes of accountability processes.

Our research questions are accordingly:

- What characterizes accountability relationships in unsettled situations related to reforms and crisis management?

How is accountability handled in circumstances that go beyond «business as usual»? Here we illustrate our analysis using the Norwegian welfare administration reform from 2005 as well as the crisis management related to the terrorist attack in 2011.

The two examples display core characteristics of public accountability. They address matters of public concern and public interest where openness and transparency are key issues.

The main data on the Norwegian welfare reform are taken from interviews with the political and administrative leadership and some members of parliament (Byrkjeflot, Christensen and Lægreid, 2014). Concerning crisis management we use interviews with core political and administrative executives conducted by the inquiry commission (NOU 2012: 14). We also use public documents, such as governmental proposals to parliament, reports from public committees and from the inquiry commission and the minutes of parliamentary sessions. Finally, we draw on secondary sources, such as research publications on the subject.

We will start by discussing different dimensions of accountability, going on to relate them to the specific challenges of accountability in unsettled situations by adding an institutional approach to instrumental considerations. Second, we will address the relationship between accountability, reform and crisis generally. Third, we will empirically illustrate the relationship between accountability and two specific Norwegian cases: the contemporary comprehensive welfare administration reform and the major terrorist crises in 2011. Fourth, we will discuss our results in relation to the broader issues of unsettled situations and «wicked issues». Finally we will draw some conclusions.

Accountability

Schillemans (2013) emphasizes that a minimum definition of accountability should include answerability and adds that it is a relational concept and a retrospective and layered process. Bovens (2007, 447) defines accountability as «the relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgment, and the actor may face consequences». So the core factors in accountability relations are information, debate and consequences (Reichersdorfer, Christensen & Vrangbæk, 2013). In contrast to responsibility, which is about entrusting someone with a task, accountability is generally retrospective (Day & Klein, 1987). A person or an organization is systematically held to account or has to answer for what happened. If they fail to carry out their tasks they are accountable for the consequences.

Public organizations face the *problem of many eyes* or who subordinate actors – the accountors – are supposed to *account to* and which criteria should be used to judge them. (Thompson, 1980). The more complex and hybrid a public apparatus is, the more difficult judgement is. Public organizations also face the problem of *many hands*. Is it individuals or organizations, political or administrative executives, street-level bureaucrats or managers who must account to superior forums – the

accountees – for actions? Actors may potentially be held to account by a number of different forums and there are different ways of categorizing who is accountable to whom (Bovens, 2007; Romzek and Dubnick, 1987; Willems and Van Dooren, 2011).

Political accountability is traditionally built on a chain of superior/subordinate relationships, i.e. voters delegate their sovereignty to elected bodies, who further delegate authority to the cabinet and the civil service. The latter are then held accountable back down the chain. i. e. the cabinet to the parliament or the civil service leaders to the political executives. This type of accountability relationship is mainly a vertical one in which the hierarchy gives the forum formal power over the actor. Political accountability is a key feature in the chain of delegation implied by the «the primacy of politics» (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011).

Administrative accountability is related to a person's position in a political-administrative hierarchy whereby an administrative superior calls a subordinate to account for his or her performance of delegated duties (Sinclair, 1995). Traditional administrative accountability is chiefly concerned with monitoring the process or procedures whereby inputs are transformed – i.e. making sure things are done the right way – which is fundamentally important in a democratic system based on the rule of law. As long as input legitimation was the primary logic of legitimation, controls were designed to secure administrative accountability: holding subordinates accountable for upholding the standards of practice – in other words, how working procedures transform inputs into outputs.

Managerial accountability, a modern version of administrative accountability related to performance management, monitors output and results and makes those with delegated authority answerable for carrying out tasks according to agreed performance criteria; this clearly has an instrumental flavour (Day and Klein, 1987). Advocates of the New Public Management (NPM) reform ideology urged leaders to change their mindsets and practices and base legitimacy on outputs and outcomes rather than inputs (Askim, Christensen & Lægreid, 2014). Many of the NPM-associated reforms implemented in effect shifted the balance from legitimacy based on appropriate inputs and processes to legitimacy based on outputs and outcomes. Accordingly, more controls than before were designed to secure managerial accountability: in other words, subordinates were held to account for realizing ex-ante defined performance targets or indicators (Bovens, 2007; Byrkjeflot, Christensen and Lægreid, 2014).

Professional accountability, with a cultural flavour, denotes the importance of professional peers or peer review. Typically in professional public organizations

different professions are constrained by professional codes of conduct – a system marked by deference to expertise (Mulgan, 2000) and a reliance on the technical knowledge of experts (Romzek and Dubnick, 1987). This type of accountability is particularly relevant for public managers who work in public organizations concerned with professional service delivery, but it is also crucial for political accountability, i.e. political leaders have to balance the need for political steering, loyalty and control with attending to professional decision-making premises and professional autonomy (March & Olsen, 1983).

Social accountability arises out of a lack of trust in government and the existence of several potential social stakeholders in the environment. This pressurizes public organizations to account for their activities vis-à-vis the public at large, stakeholders or (civil) interest groups and users' organizations, via public reporting, public panels, information on the internet or through the media (Malena et al., 2004). Giving account to various stakeholders in society normally occurs on a voluntary basis, but can reflect strong external pressure. It is often connected with image-building, reputational management and externally oriented legitimacy, i.e. pretending to be modern, efficient, trustworthy and transparent, welcoming external participation, etc. (Carpenter and Krause, 2012; Maor 2010; Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012).

Bovens, Cutrin & 't Hart (2010) distinguish between mandatory *vertical accountability* and voluntary *horizontal accountability*. In the first instance, the forum has formal power over the actor, as in political, administrative and managerial accountability. In the second instance of horizontal accountability, the «accountee» is not hierarchically superior to the «accountor» (Schillemans, 2011:390). There is more room for choice and moral convictions about duty with no direct intervention from leaders, as in social and professional accountability based on informal accountability relations.

Accountability has different purposes (Bovens, Schillemans & 't Hart, 2008) or functions (Willems & Van Dooren, 2014), which may overlap in several ways (Aucoin & Heintzman, 2000). Dubnick and Frederickson (2011) identify three different «promises» that accountability mechanisms should fulfill: control, legitimacy and performance. Actors might be responsible for processes, procedures and compliance with rules (as in administrative accountability) or for finances, performance and outcomes (as in managerial accountability) (Behn, 2001; Bovens et al., 2010).

Accountability in unsettled situations – a supplementary institutional approach

Characteristics of unsettled situations

Traditionally accountability literature has been anchored in instrumental approaches, such as the instrumental perspective in organization theory (March and Olsen, 1983) or the principal-agent model (Gailmard, 2014; Bovens, Goodin & Schillemans, 2014). Typically it has addressed routine and settled situations with clear goals, strong means–end knowledge and pre-determined superior and subordinate actors in hierarchies where it is pretty clear who is accountable to whom and for what. Political, administrative and managerial accountability are primary. The information and reporting phase and the consequences and punishment phase of accountability are crucial. The degree of political salience is normally low, and decision-making is largely delegated to managers in semi-independent institutions. A logic of consequences and dyadic, monocentric relationships between certain leaders and subordinates, or in the principal-agent terminology, opportunistic agents and their principals interested in specific results – are at the forefront (Knott & Hammond, 2012; March, 1994).

In contrast, unsettled situations require us to address the complexity and dynamics of accountability relations using a supplementary institutional approach. In multilevel, transboundary and hybrid circumstances accountability channels are normally multiple (Bovens et al., 2008). Goals and means are ambiguous, participation is more fluid, authority is more contested and experiences are less transparent (Olsen, 2014). Accountability relations become more interpretive, interactive and reflexive in nature. Who is accountable to whom and for what is not stable but is constantly evolving and changing. Who is to blame does not necessarily depend on a strong causal understanding and hard evidence but rather on ambiguous and contested interpretations by different actors and forums in different contexts, where myths or symbols may prevail (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Societal norms and expectations of appropriate behaviour and approval from social constituencies are important (March & Olsen, 1989). Motivation and control are more internal, based on traditional cultures and socialization into a professional ethic and public ethos, and actors and forums are supposed to behave in a more altruistic and integrative way (Selznick, 1957).

Actors often face wicked issues that transcend different levels and policy areas and are characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity. In unfamiliar situations new accountability relations are added to traditional ones, making them more complex

and multi-dimensional. Formal and vertical accountability relationships are supplemented with informal and horizontal accountability relations in «living» institutions. New accountability relations are added to old ones creating complex layers and combinations of coexisting institutions (Lægreid & Verhoest 2010; Olsen, 2013; Romzek, 2000; Streeck & Thelen, 2005).

In unsettled situations, the empirical evidence for a positive relationship between accountability, reform and crises is often inconclusive. There may be both agency drift and forum drift due to lack of motivation, time and energy, knowledge and capabilities (Schillemans and Busuioc, 2014) and the balance between institutional autonomy and accountability is problematic. Rather than assuming predetermined principals and agents, there is a need to examine how accountability relations play out in relation to the way authority is actually organized, exercised and controlled (Olsen, 2013). Public administration is involved in policy advice, interpretation, implementation and enforcement and its relations to stakeholders are discretionary and multiple; this challenges traditional hierarchical and vertical accountability relations in which the hierarchical political leadership is supreme.

Summing up, a supplementary institutional approach delves more into broad socio-cultural processes and informal norms and values (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Selznick, 1957). Unsettled situations, like reforms and crises, may be characterized by cultural path-dependency and manipulation of symbols, which makes accountability relationships more contested, complex, hybrid and ambiguous. We see competing instrumental and institutional logics in accountability processes.

Accountability and reform

Despite that comprehensive modern reforms are taking place all over the world, the relationship between accountability and reform is still contested and we have to operate with a multi-dimensional accountability concept going beyond vertical accountability forms if we are to understand it (Christensen and Lægreid, 2015). This is especially clear in the ambiguous and unsettled situations that often characterize periods of reform (Olsen, 2013, 2014). Many different accountability processes take place at the same time, involving a vast array of actors. In each process, different kinds of information will be demanded, different kinds of discussions will occur, and different kinds of consequences will apply. Governments are continuously being called to account by several account-holders for their actions and decisions and within several different forums simultaneously (Willems & van Dooren, 2014). The driving forces behind this process may be attempts to engage in hierarchical structural design, negotiation processes, cultural path-

dependency and compatibility concerns or else reform myths and fashions/fads (Brunsson, 1989; Egeberg, 2012; March & Olsen, 1983; Selznick, 1957)

Studying accountability in reform processes therefore requires us to analyze the complexity and dynamics of accountability relations and processes (Olsen, 2013). The answers to questions such as who has the right to call to account, to discuss and debate the information given and to face consequences and pass judgement are more fluid. By their very nature, reforms imply that the patterns of influence and accountability inherent in existing structures and cultures will be redefined, creating new dynamics. Rather than just asking whether government officials are more or less accountable after reforms, one should also focus on what kind of accountability is perceived as appropriate (Romzek, 2000). Will even dynamic and unstable situations between new organizational forms and multiple and overlapping accountability regimes be constrained or dominated by political accountability? Reforms driven by ideology or wishful thinking rather than by evidence-based knowledge may produce unintended effects and make accountability relations difficult. Reform processes do not always happen as deliberate design and institutional engineering but are often ambiguous and conflict-driven, producing accountability challenges.

Contemporary administrative reforms foster both change in basic government arrangements and new forms of accountability relations. One dimension is changes in vertical specialization and coordination, balancing the need for central political control with institutional and leadership autonomy (Egeberg, 2012). Another is the structural changes in horizontal specialization and coordination, balancing the need for unambiguous roles with the need for coordination and a more holistic approach. Combining these two dimensions creates systems along a continuum from integrated to fragmented, alluding, respectively, to post-NPM and NPM reforms, both of which added to and partly modified what we can label Weberian or Old Public Administration features. Public reforms may also partly focus on cultural changes, trying to develop subcultures or changing cultures, for example NPM's focus on service cultures, or the more holistic cultures espoused by post-NPM reforms, but increased cultural complexity or hybridity are also evident in some reforms (Christensen and Lægreid, 2007).

Under NPM accountability came to rely to a greater extent on non-majoritarian semi-independent agencies populated by public officials loosely coupled to public opinion who were neither directly elected nor managed by elected representatives. Brunsson (1989) pointed out early on that this represented a challenging situation for leaders and accountability relationships, i.e. leaders would receive less information from and have less influence over subordinate institutions and leaders,

but would still be accountable to parliament and the general public, with no change in the ministerial accountability principle. Politicians have a strategic, goal-setting role, and civil servants are supposed to be autonomous managers held to account through contracts, performance arrangements, reporting and incentives (Barberis, 1998). There is a built-in inconsistency in NPM. The reformers claim to empower customers, free managers and strengthen political control, but these three aims are difficult to achieve simultaneously, making accountability more ambiguous (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011).

Over the past decade the NPM model has been challenged by post-NPM reform measures characterized by an increased focus on integration and coordination as well as by a renewed emphasis on the rule of law and stronger central government capacity (Christensen and Lægreid, 2007). Post-NPM reforms represent centralization, meaning vertical reintegration, but also seek to improve the horizontal coordination of governmental organizations and to enhance coordination between the government and other actors, alluding to New Public Governance (Klijn, 2012; Lodge & Gill, 2011; Osborne, 2010). The trend in the post-NPM reforms is apparently to bring political accountability to the fore once again which may potentially influence the complex system of relationships between different types of accountability.

Under post-NPM politicians are guarantors of compromise deals between multiple stakeholders, while civil servants are more often network managers and partnership leaders. While NPM had a more internal focus on improving efficiency and promoting competition based on innovative strategies, post-NPM governance-inspired reforms have been more inter-organizationally oriented and have tried to enhance cross-sectoral collaboration strategies (Sørensen, 2012). While NPM promoted competition-based innovative strategies, post-NPM has enhanced collaborative strategies. We have seen one main reform wave supplement another in a complementary process whereby the trade-off between different administrative modes has changed, resulting in increased complexity and hybrid organizational forms as well as new accountability challenges (Christensen and Lægreid, 2007).

The effects of contemporary reforms on accountability are often inconclusive (Lægreid, 2014). Emphasizing output and outcomes at the expense of inputs and procedures does not necessarily mean more or less accountability. Rather it means that different accountability relationships should be addressed. Dubnick (2011) addresses this coupling between reforms and accountability by introducing the «reformist paradox» in which efforts to improve accountability through reforms generate consequences that might alter, complicate or undermine existing forms of

accountability. One may focus on what kind of accountability is related to different reforms and their dynamics (Romzek, 2000). Accountability in a multi-functional public sector means being responsible for the achievement of multiple and often ambiguous objectives.

In a hierarchical model the concept of accountability is primarily related to upward accountability to political sovereigns. The network or partnership models are different. Partnerships need some level of independence but at the same time they should be accountable upwards to politicians, horizontally to other agencies and local government and downwards to citizens. They thus have to face the challenges of political as well as administrative and managerial accountability (Pollitt, 2003). Networks in partnership models supplement rather than replace the traditional welfare state hierarchy and allude to professional as well as social accountability, which means combining instrumental and institutional factors (Bouckaert, Peters and Verhoest, 2010).

Accountability and crises

Societal crises always involve public organizations in one way or another, so their level of competence, preparedness, organization and trust are crucial (Christensen, Fimreite and Læg Reid, 2013). Crises may be man-made or occur naturally, so that crisis management is likely to involve ex ante preparedness/prevention, handling the crisis itself and post-crisis management. How political and administrative leaders organize for crises ex ante is important and concerns both the use and allocation of resources and how organizations deal with specialization and coordination both internally and vis-à-vis other organizations (Hutter & Power, 2005). When a crisis strikes that transcends organizational boundaries, leaders must define and interpret the crisis, paying attention to both the internal and external dimensions. This means deciding how to prioritize resources internally and how to communicate with stake-holders in the environment (Boin, t'Hart & Sundelius, 2005). Crises and external shocks may reveal weaknesses in public organizations, but are also challenging because the leadership must improvise and delegate to develop the necessary flexibility.

Post-crisis accountability processes tend to differ from accountability processes in settled situations because they are more political and strategic and often accompanied by different accountability management efforts (Kuipers and 't Hart, 2014). Rational learning processes after crises are constrained by the symbols of blame avoidance, political survival strategies and exploitation, but also path-dependency factors. One important forum is the mass media, which report, monitor and judge the performance of the various public actors involved in the crisis, but

formal forums such as regulatory bodies, audit offices, investigation commissions, judicial authorities and the parliament may also be activated. Actors often become involved in blame allocation by denying the problem, defending themselves or passing the buck (Hood, 2014). But their actions can also be more ritualistic or symbolic in other ways; they may show solidarity and empathize, offer reassurance, apologize or simply be responsive. Indeed, actors are more likely to apologize, express regret, reframe, justify or defend their actions than simply allowing themselves to be called to account (Dubnick, 2005; Olsen, 2014).

While there is often a strong wish to learn from a crisis, dramatic crises may produce incremental rather than radical policy and structural changes, because of cultural path-dependency and resistance (Boin, McConnell and 't Hart, 2008). Reputation management is often important in times of crises, because the system is exposed, but lack of cultural compatibility may hamper changes and reforms (Carpenter, 2010; Maor, 2010; Rhee & Kim, 2012). Accountability might be more about political communication than about learning and improvement. Communication strategies may be either accommodating or defensive (Coombes, 1998). Post-crisis accountability tends overall to be complex, ambiguous and uncertain and to have a political flavour, where successful reputation management may mask the true nature of the crisis (Watson, 2007).

Internal security and crisis management are often responses to typical wicked issues. Transboundary crises cannot be solved by any organization in isolation but require cooperation, collaboration and coordination between organizations, ministerial areas and administrative levels. Their complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty often puts pressure on accountability relations. Crisis management involves various critical tasks such as accountability and learning (Boin et al., 2005; Boin and 't Hart, 2012; 't Hart, 2014). Recovery and aftermath politics is not only about addressing resilience and the capacity to return to «normality» or to «bounce back», but also about reviewing and learning from the event, which may differ between types of crisis and contexts. This reviewing/learning phase often involves accountability processes and blame games. A key challenge is to restore trust in governance capacity during and after crises. Accountability is a major challenge – one that implies looking back and requiring people and organizations to judge their performance, which limits the potential for change (Boin et al., 2008). Office-holders have to account to public forums for their actions prior to and during a crisis.

What are the potential similarities and differences between processes of reform and crisis management? First, of all, both represent unsettled situations and as such are likely to be complex, hybrid and ambiguous – all the more so in comprehensive

reforms and major crises. Second, they both put political–administrative systems under strain and stress, i.e. the systems are open and exposed, leading actors to want either to change or to defend the status quo, depending on the pattern of influence. Third, reforms imply conscious efforts to bring about structural or cultural change, while crisis management has an element of system containment and reaction based on the existing organization, but also potential for change and organizational improvisation.

Accountability, reform and crisis in Norway

The welfare administration reform

Traditionally Norway had a tripartite welfare administration system with tasks divided between the National Pension and Insurance Agency, the National Employment Service and the social services based at municipal level (Fimreite and Læg Reid, 2009). Since the 1980s, the organization of welfare services had been regarded as too fragmented, but it was politically difficult to introduce reform. After a conflict-ridden process, the parliament approved the merger of the Pensions and Insurance Agency and the Employment Service into a single central Agency for Employment and Welfare (NAV) in 2005. The reform also introduced formal collaboration between the central NAV agency and the social administration in the municipalities. The NAV collaborative offices – situated in each of Norway's 428 municipalities – constitute a one-stop shop system where NAV services are integrated with local social services. This front-line office is organized as a central-local government partnership regulated by local agreements. The merger and partnership arrangements are typically post-NPM or whole-of-government features designed to enhance vertical and horizontal coordination, but the reform also applies an NPM-related performance management system meaning that overall the reform is hybrid (Christensen, Fimreite & Læg Reid, 2013).

The reform has shown more coordination problems between the state and the municipalities than between the different services. The joined-up government approach tends to make accountability relations more ambiguous, partly because a central and a local hierarchy are combined in the local offices. The strong central agency potentially undermines political accountability and dominates the local level, multi-level performance steering has increased in intensity and there is a tension surrounding professional norms and values. (Byrkjeflot, Christensen and Læg Reid, 2014). Thus, accountability relationships have become increasingly complex and hybrid in situations where the government has acquired a more horizontal and multi-level character (Michels & Meijer, 2008). The reform

demonstrates a kind of hybridity and pragmatism (Ansell, 2011). Instead of replacing hierarchy with networks, partnership and intermediate organizations, a combination of formal and informal organizational elements has been adopted. What we see is a layered system that has developed in the shadow of hierarchy.

Following the reform the performance management system in NAV resembles more a contact-steering than a contract-steering system, in which processes of target-setting and target reporting are used as opportunities for debate and negotiations without much rewarding or penalizing (Askim, Christensen and Læg Reid, 2014). Despite the rhetoric of partnership, it has been very difficult to integrate the local services into an overall performance management system and the central and local service lines are not fully integrated yet. It also turned out to be difficult to replace specialization by tasks or purpose with the partnership model, especially within the area of pensions and insurance, and in connection with a 2008 pension reform there was a partial return to specialization and vertical accountability relations, which may be seen as a learning aspect (Byrkjeflot, Christensen & Læg Reid, 2014). This shows how difficult it is to integrate or join up government and partnership ideas in a long-established system of local self-government and how it creates tensions between the central and the local hierarchies. As often experienced, it is not easy to include cross-cutting targets in the performance management system.

There has also been a kind of over-steering, adding new layers of internal vertical reporting requirements and thus reducing the flexibility of the local level. This overloading might reflect a contradiction between NPM ideas of greater local responsibility and street-level discretion and the long-established system of central political and administrative accountability. Accountability at the lower level, with a close connection between executive politicians and services, has problems working in this way, especially when a salient policy field like welfare services is concerned. Thus, what we can observe is an accountability dilemma in the way that the requirements of local political and administrative accountability contradict the imperatives of effective service delivery as seen from above (Flinders, 2011).

Aligned with that is the tendency to emphasize the controlling rather than the learning function of accountability. Performance management has tended to be linked closely to target achievement or to locating and investigating failures. As a consequence of this approach the focus of the accountability systems is on «what went wrong and who should be blamed?» instead of on learning aspects. Goal ambiguity matters too. The welfare administration agencies are complex organizations with a wide task portfolio and regional and local administrative arrangements. The goal ambiguity in the delivery of welfare services makes the accountability process inherently complex.

Focusing on reform failures has characterized the work of the General Auditor Office, and the parliamentary Control Committee has also become more proactive in performance auditing and controlling the work of the NAV agency from outside. The parent ministry also tries regularly to intervene in NAV through the central agency, reflecting a more proactive ministry, although one with capacity/attention problems and often a selective focus, using informal steering channels outside the formal management system and also often coming under pressure from parliament. Accountability relations are complicated by a dual two-tiered governance system – one formal performance-management system and one informal system addressing the pressing political issues of the day, which are not easily dealt with by the rather rigid performance management system (Byrkjeflot, Christensen and Læg Reid, 2014).

Our case shows that administrative reforms and the introduction of performance management create new accountability structures, which influence service delivery, but not necessarily in the direction expected by the reform entrepreneurs. The more frequent measurement and reporting of performance data means that those being called to account get better at meeting the requirements of performance reporting, but not necessarily better at performing their actual duties. More resources are used for measuring and reporting than for «getting the job done» (Olsen, 2013, 462), in turn generating complaints about accountability overload and reports not read, debated or followed up. This potentially results in accountability deficits. Public services characterized by task complexity, multiple and possibly contradictory goals, disagreement about goals, and uncertainty about the link between service delivery and outcomes are at odds with performance systems designed to hold actors accountable for a number of manageable and measurable indicators. The management system does not secure managerial accountability in the NAV agency (Askim, Christensen & Læg Reid, 2014). Administrative accountability is still high, but supplemented by managerial accountability, and goal operationalization, transparency and actual goal achievement are relatively low.

The specific reform we are examining changed the trade-offs between different accountability relations, both formally and actually. The interface between local and central government produces difficult challenges. Both political and administrative executives at the local level report that political accountability is under pressure and that mayors are also experiencing ambiguity related to municipal accountability for the new one-stop shops (Christensen and Læg Reid, 2014).

Organizing for internal security and crisis management

Two shocking terrorist attacks occurred in Norway on 22 July 2011. First, a car bomb destroyed several buildings in the central government complex in the capital, Oslo, including the office of the prime minister. Eight people were killed and nine seriously injured. Less than two hours later, 69 young people from the Labour Party's youth organization attending a summer camp on Utøya Island were shot and killed; 33 others were injured. Both attacks were carried out by an ethnic Norwegian citizen. One year later, his trial demonstrated that he had operated alone. He was judged sane, found guilty and sentenced to 21 years in prison (Christensen, Lægreid and Rykkja, 2013). The 22 July 2011 attacks dealt a terrible blow to Norway, which is generally regarded as a peaceful, open and robust democracy and has had limited experience of terrorism (Rykkja, Lægreid & Fimreite, 2011). They were quickly characterized as the most devastating in the country since the Second World War. Government structures for preventing and handling crises were put to a severe test.

Regarding *crisis and terrorism prevention*, the Norwegian government had moved in 2004 to implement a number of specific measures known as the Security Project (Christensen, Lægreid and Rykkja, 2013). The main aim was to protect the central government complex in Oslo from potential attacks. The project was initiated by the centre-right minority government and followed up by the Red-Green majority coalition led by Prime Minister Stoltenberg from 2005. An important component of the project was to close certain streets near the government complex to general traffic. Even though the project supposedly had a high priority, some of its main measures were never implemented, most prominently closing the road used seven years later by the terrorist. The security concerns raised in the project competed with other priorities and were largely neglected, and the threat of a possible attack against the government complex was discounted. Apparently, lack of motivation, priority and attention among central political and administrative actors undermined the project's implementation.

The process of implementing the Security Project was ridden with ambiguity concerning roles and accountability (Christensen, Lægreid & Rykkja, 2013). The question of who should do what, especially related to the unclear accountability structure between the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Government Administration and the Ministry of Justice became pertinent. Complex accountability relations were dispersed both vertically and horizontally. There was a problem of «many eyes», that is, uncertainty concerning to whom different actors

were accountable. There were also «many hands» – i.e., many actors and significant ambiguity regarding who was accountable for what. This case also reveals ambiguous accountability relations between central and local government. To a large extent, the principle of local authority was heeded. In the aftermath of the attack, the government was criticized for using their superior overriding authority on rather small infrastructure projects (roads and railways), but not on a matter of crucial national security.

The existence of accountability ambiguity in the implementation of the security measures tells the same story as in many other countries that have a reasonably high security awareness, for example in the USA after 9/11 (Kettl, 2004). In both cases, a major explanation for security failures was complex accountability relations and lack of coordination. Our findings add to the emerging literature on the instrumental difficulties executive leaders experience in handling multi-level and cross-sectoral decisions and implementation, or so-called «wicked issues». As Egeberg observed (2012), reaching across levels and sectors increases the likelihood of structural complexity and hybridity. Transboundary issues such as public security and crisis management can easily run into accountability deficits when many different organizations are involved and each ministry and agency has a narrow focus on their own primary task portfolio. This is especially the case when the line ministries are strong and the overarching ministries and units are weak, like in Norway (Christensen, Lægreid & Rykkja, forthcoming).

The *management* of the crisis while the terrorist was still at large was heavily criticized both retrospectively by the official commission (NOU 2012: 14), but also by many politicians, affected families and media. The most severe allegations were the following: The Police Agency had crisis procedures that were not followed when needed, and information and coordination failed to materialize at crucial moments, implying both vertical (agency-district relationships) and horizontal ambiguities (between police districts) (Christensen, Lægreid and Rykkja, forthcoming). There were failures at the strategic level and also a lot of operative failures. The police accepted no blame, however, and showed little empathy afterwards, which may reflect an important cultural feature of the police organization. Their reputation management was defensive rather than accommodative (Christensen & Lægreid, 2015). As a result, they received a lot of extra criticism.

In the aftermath of the attacks, the central political leadership, represented by the Prime Minister, was mostly praised for its handling of the July 2011 terrorist attacks because it was seen to have «risen above» the crisis by talking about democracy, compassion and solidarity, even though there was much to blame it for. Later on the praise turned slightly to critique, identifying a lack of preparedness and action

capacity, but it still managed to stay clear and distance itself from the heavy criticism targeted at the police (Christensen, Lægreid & Rykkja, 2013). This example highlights the often crucial debate related to crisis handling – namely, the accountability debate, which in the case of executive politicians played out in a symbolic arena, while the debate about police and accountability was much more specific and practical.

Both during and after the attack, the July 2011 terrorist act was regarded as an attack on major political interests. The targets were symbolic and high profile, while the execution of the attacks was exceptional. One might have expected this to accelerate the government's response; however, it did not, which is puzzling (Fimreite et. al., 2013). So in the aftermath few major organizational changes were made in the crisis organization apparatus. The historical context, the strength and robustness of democracy in Norway, cultural perceptions and the level of trust in the government and among citizens seem to be important explanatory factors. And the Commission's narrative was a cultural one discounting necessary structural changes.

The problem of «many hands» was obvious in this case (Thompson, 1980). It proved difficult to point to specific office holders or organizations that could be held accountable, whether related to the Security Project or to the actual handling of the terrorist attack, even though many fingers were pointed at the police for the latter. No politicians were forced to resign, and the Prime Minister was occupied more with looking ahead and making incremental improvements than with looking backwards to allow his own conduct to be judged (Christensen, Lægreid & Rykkja, 2013). Moreover, the parliamentary inquiry concluded half-heartedly that the vague category of «governmental authorities» was to blame. There was no confidence motion in the parliament. No specific individual political or administrative executives or other public officials were held accountable, nor any specific government authority. Assessing accountability in this crisis mainly consisted of symbols to do with learning, improvement and enhancing the public values of effectiveness and efficiency, while accountability questions remained ambiguous and unresolved, as did the structural challenges revealed in the report from the Commission. A fuller appreciation of wider political accountability is needed in tragic cases of this kind. However, the prospects for such a wider sense of accountability may not be enhanced in a managerialist era (Gregory, 1998).

Discussion

The establishment of the one-stop shops and partnerships locally in the *welfare administrative reform* reallocated tasks and changed the division of labour through typical central hierarchical means. It established new, and changed existing lines of control and authority. The main goals were consciously designed and controlled from the top. However, the reform also introduced some typical network elements. The partnership agreement alluded to an equal relationship between the state and the local authorities, representing a joining-up at the base, meaning a post-NPM measure. However, the NAV reform also implied joining up at the top, through the establishment of the newly merged NAV agency under the Ministry of Labour. Guidance, control and evaluation were mainly top-down. Even though the horizontal integration between employment and pensions was challenging, it worked better than the vertical relationship (Christensen, Fimreite and Læg Reid, 2013).

The reform challenged the traditional vertical hierarchical elements of accountability. The balance between vertical political and administrative accountability, which worked in favour of the central agency after the reform, was blurred by enhanced efforts to introduce managerial accountability, which turned out to be difficult to implement. But horizontal accountability relations such as social and professional accountability were part of the equation too, making those relations ambiguous, multiple and complex. The way the coupling between formal accountability relations and actual accountability relations played out in practice was rather loose. And overall accountability relations were constrained by important contextual features such as the salience of the policy area and task-specific features, such as the degree of professionalism and acceptance of local variations in service delivery, reflecting cultural features (Byrkjeflot, Christensen and Læg Reid, 2014).

Within the area of *internal security*, the 2011 terrorist attacks revealed a longstanding need for more focused attention, central leadership, authority and coordination. Providing the necessary powers in the form of adequate tools and sanctions to ensure control, follow-up and implementation as well as rewards to ensure commitment turned out to be crucial assets, although, interestingly, this was barely reflected in the official commission's report, which focused on a culture and leadership narrative (NOU 2012:14). Even though no-one was formally held accountable or punished, political and administrative leaders at a high strategic level fared better in the commission's evaluation and in the media than the police leading the actual crisis management did, reflecting a cleverer use of symbols.

Examining developments over time shows that the primary structures of crisis management still stand strong, even though the call for more and better coordination has been loud – especially after the terrorist attacks in 2011. In an incremental effort, the government tried to weaken the silo-effect of the doctrine by building secondary structures through two complementary strategies (Christensen, Lægneid and Rykkja, 2014): first, by establishing collegial network arrangements for cross-boundary information sharing and discussion; and second by introducing a lead agency approach. A general problem with network arrangements is that they largely involve part-time participants with a loyalty to their primary position. Furthermore, they often lack a clear mandate, appropriate resources, and authority and potent governance tools. Their meetings are often irregular and infrequent.

The Ministry of Justice has gradually moved towards becoming a lead ministry in crisis management, making it a driving force in policy development and responsible for coordination. The introduction of the lead agency approach without challenging the principle of ministerial responsibility, however, creates ambiguity vis-à-vis the semi-independent central agencies that also have a lead role. The agencies face considerable obstacles when trying to meddle in other ministerial areas. This reflects the fact that there are no universal solutions – perhaps more critically so within the area of internal security and crisis management. Crises are difficult to predict and increasingly complex and a certain level of improvisation and organizational flexibility is therefore always necessary – a challenge not much reflected in incremental structural changes.

The two cases portray some important similarities (Table 1). They are both examples of unsettled situations and governmental efforts to tackle wicked problems and solve central accountability problems in situations where the problem structure does not seem to fit the organizational structure.

Table 1. Accountability changes – reform, crisis and interpretations.

	Reform	Crisis
Main similarities	Increasing complexity, hybridity, uncertainty and ambiguity. Multiple and dynamic accountability relations including vertical and horizontal, mandatory and voluntary accountability. The problems of many hands and many eyes are obvious.	
Differences	Competing political accountability on national and local level. Administrative and managerial accountability challenging political accountability on central level. Learning by reorganizing.	Ambiguity and conflict in both vertical and horizontal accountability in central crisis prevention. Handling of crisis focused on managerial accountability and operational failures. Crisis aftermath characterized by attempts at blame avoidance. Incremental structural learning
Instrumental-structural factors	Post-NPM features dominate, but NPM elements too	Instrumental-operational challenges most Important
Cultural factors	Difficult to reconcile central and local cultures.	Main narrative is cultural interpretation. Incremental change.
Symbolic factors	Holistic central symbol. Partnership similar symbol on local level.	Democratic symbols used by central political leadership. Blame-avoidance symbols used by police

Both the reform and the crisis situation represent a government system in transition with a lot of complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty. Organizational arrangements are hybrid and complex in various ways, which tends to produce multiple accountability challenges which tended to change over time.

The welfare administration reform tried to solve the tension between the two hierarchies – i.e. the principle of ministerial responsibility and local self-government – by introducing the one-stop shop at the local level and merging central agencies in order to increase both vertical and horizontal integration with a view to handling wicked transboundary issues, but it ran into complex accountability problems. Both before and after the crisis the handling reflected conflicts and ambiguities related to vertical and horizontal accountability, initially highlighting competing political accountability relations, and later revealing a tension between political and administrative/managerial accountability.

Finding a close relationship between the goals of the reform, how the organizational arrangements work in practice and how accountability relations play out has been difficult. The same applies to preparedness for crisis management, how crisis management pans out when a crisis actually occurs and how accountability relations are handled. In general, when vertical accountability relations compete or have to be supplemented by horizontal arrangements, accountability becomes more multi-dimensional and challenging, and the relationships between formal and actual accountability become more ambiguous and uncertain in unsettled situations.

There are also important differences. The reform mainly highlighted conflicts between central and local political accountability as they played out locally in the partnerships, while the crisis more played out at the central level. The conflicts and ambiguities of accountability on the central level are definitely more vertical in the reform (ministry-agency) than in the crisis where horizontal components are obvious (between ministries), especially in the prevention phase. Blame-avoidance had a far bigger role to play in the aftermath of the crisis than in the reform. And the reform was more of a «big bang» reform, although eventually reorganized, while in the area of internal security and crisis management change has been rather incremental and cautious.

How can we interpret the reform and crisis, based, respectively, on instrumental and institutional approaches? First, the reform was explicitly a structural reform, dominated by post-NPM elements but also including some NPM elements, while instrumental-operational challenges seem to have been very important in the handling of the crisis. Second, the reform revealed the difficulties of reconciling central and local political-administrative cultures, while the main official narrative in the crisis was culture and leadership. Third, in the reform a holistic symbol was used on the central level and a similar partnership symbol was used locally; in the crisis the central political executives used democratic symbols while the police chiefs used blame-avoidance symbols.

In unsettled situations the «wicked problems» being dealt with are typically multi-dimensional, poorly bounded, vaguely formulated and not easily broken down. This makes it very difficult to evaluate the success of the relevant arrangements. New forms of cooperation pose new challenges with regard to accountability and, consequently, the legitimacy of decision-making and institutions. Accountability relationships become increasingly complex and hybrid in situations where the government acquires a more horizontal and multi-level character (Michels & Meijer, 2008).

In transitional situations the deliberation, discussion and debating phase of accountability is more relevant and important because the standards for accountable behaviour are ambiguous. Dialogue about behaviour might be more important than formal reporting and information or imposing formal punishment based on defensive compliance. In complex and transitional reform periods or in unexpected and changing crisis situations accountability standards are not clearly defined by stable external criteria but have to be formulated in an endogenous process. Thus an open and transparent debate about who is accountable for whom and for what is a core element in unsettled situations. Often one faces compound and composite arrangements in dynamic contexts (Bovens & Schillemans, 2014), where there is a need to be sensitive to complex contextual constraints.

The discussion about accountability might also be turned from a demand to increase accountability to one to reduce it or else a combined approach (Flinders, 2014). In unsettled situations the normal response is often to reduce the accountability gap by introducing new types of accountability. But one can also address this problem by trying to reduce accountability requirements. In crisis and reform processes that are complex, ambiguous and uncertain, unrealistically high demands are often made of accountability. In situations that are not easy or straightforward, unrealistically high expectations can easily lead to negative assessments of accountability (Willems and van Dooren, 2011). Adopting a strategy to explain fragmentation, complexity and ambiguity indicates that public accountability is also about the management of expectations in situations where these are multiple and conflicting (Dubnick, 2011; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987).

We have revealed that uncovering the links between administrative reforms and crises on the one hand and accountability on the other is more complex than it appears at first sight. The accountability obligations faced by public actors are multiple and varied and often represent tensions and deficits (Mulgan, 2014). Administrative reforms, as well as crises, may create new formal structures and institutional norms and values, which influence accountability relations, but not necessarily in the direction expected by the reform agents. This implies that such unsettled situations may affect accountability relations but also that different accountability relations may influence reforms and crisis management. In unsettled situations accountability types are in flux and tend to become blurred. This supports the reformist paradox (Dubnick, 2011) which states that efforts to improve accountability through reforms might alter, undermine or complicate existing forms of accountability (Flinders, 2014).

We have shown how complex, dynamic and layered accountability forms emerge in two unsettled situations that are partly similar and partly different. Vertical

accountability relations are supplemented by other accountability types and accountability relations become more ambiguous, contested and loosely coupled. Reforms and crises may affect accountability relations but not in a straightforward way. Our argument is that in unsettled situations different co-existing accountability arrangements unfold, producing rather complex and hybrid systems.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that in unsettled situations we have to go beyond an instrumental approach to accountability and supplement it with an institutional approach. This makes the accountability discussion less elegant but hopefully more realistic. In unsettled transboundary situations the context is dynamic and evolving. We have illustrated our argument by addressing two unsettled situations: administrative reform and crisis where it is not obvious who is accountable to whom, for what and why, and where the relationships between accountability reform and crisis are blurred.

The complex and hybrid welfare state reforms moved vertical accountability relations towards managerial accountability, as illustrated by our case. Accountability for output and outcomes increased and accountability for process was reduced; there was also a rise in horizontal accountability. Our crisis case also reflected the more general pattern of complex accountability relations and interorganizational activities that generate important challenges for accountability (Mulgan, 2014). Shared responsibilities will tend to blur accountability relations. The different accountability mechanisms presented have to be treated as supplementary and complementary in a mixed political order that combines and blends different modes of governance (Olsen, 2010). In unsettled situations accountability faces ambiguous obligations that are both complex and conflicting in a context of dynamic change and evolving situations (Mulgan, 2014). Difficult dilemmas need to be handled to which there are no easy answers.

We have revealed a multiple accountability regime in which the different accountability mechanisms do not substitute for each other (Schillemans, 2008), but are overlapping and complementary (Scott, 2000). In such cases a new accountability regime with more layered accountability forms emerges. A key challenge is how to handle hybrid accountability relations embedded in partly competing institutional logics. It is often claimed that such different conceptions of accountability may undermine organizational effectiveness. But this might not always be the case (Schillemans and Bovens, 2011). Multiple accountability may present an appropriate solution for an increasingly pluralistic system of governance.

In unsettled situations with a fluid, complex, flexible, semi-autonomous and fragmented multi-level governance polity one has to go beyond the traditional vertical formal hierarchical models of political accountability to close the «accountability gap» that emerged in the aftermath of the NPM reforms (Flinders, 2011). We have to rethink democratic accountability in ways that resonate with the new reality of transitional governance systems.

Reform processes as well as crises represent dynamic and unexpected situations. Often reform agents and crisis managers have limited power and also weak means-end knowledge. Thus we need to study the dynamic relationships between reforms, crises and accountability and how multiple and hybrid accountability relations interact and change over time. In other words, a multi-dimensional accountability approach is needed to handle accountability in a pluralistic political-administrative system.

The relationship between administrative reform, crises and accountability has highlighted the need for new accountability mechanisms to supplement formal vertical accountability relations. But it is also important to address the need to reduce new accountability measures by promoting reforms less concerned with blame avoidance, low trust and scepticism towards politics (Flinders, 2014). A third focus might be the design of relevant accountability mechanisms and the conditions and contexts in which they will work well (Bovens and Schillemans, 2014). Accountability design has not been a prominent feature of administrative reforms and crisis management, so a stronger focus on meaningful accountability design and on what type of accountability to choose when might be in order.

It is worth pointing out that some of the results in our two cases were rather unexpected and to reflect on why this should be so. In the reform case, learning proved to be a more prominent consideration. One main reason for this may be the accountability tensions and ambiguities produced by this complex major reform, both vertically and horizontally. This implies a need to simplify the formal structure, which would entail reorganizing the tasks concerned with pensions and giving them more internal independence, a move also supported by a content reform in the pensions system. In the crisis situation, one would think that such a profound and unexpected event would have led to deep reforms in the crisis management system, but that did not happen, partly because the dominant political discourse focused on democracy while the official inquiry commission pointed to cultural elements, and partly because the complexity and ambiguity of crisis management in the different phases did not point to clear structural changes.

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